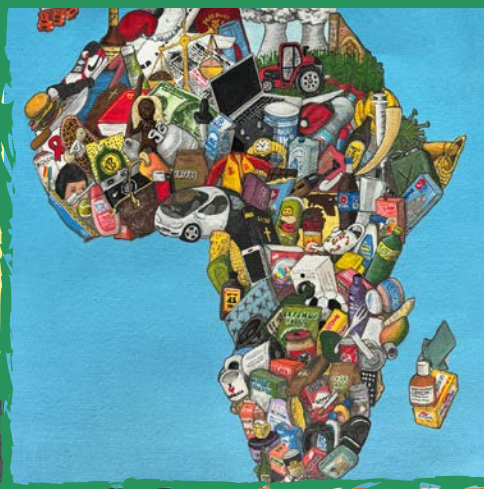
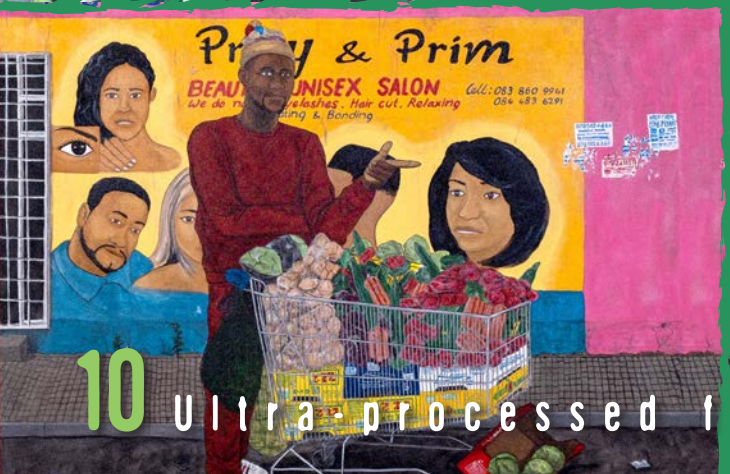
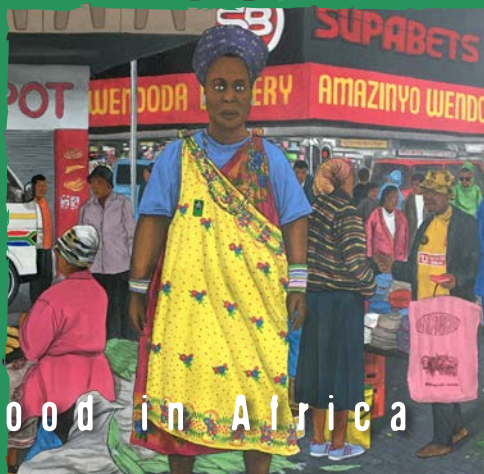
AFRICAN CENTRE
FOR BIODIVERSITY

August 2024

UPF IN AFRICA SYNTHESIS BRIEFING







10 Ultra-processed food in Africa

AFRICAN CENTRE FOR BIODIVERSITY

20 years of advocating for food sovereignty in Africa

The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) is committed to dismantling inequalities and resisting corporate industrial expansion in Africa's food and agriculture systems.

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Acknowledgements
The ACB gratefully acknowledges the financial support of several donors, though this briefing may not necessarily reflect their views.

To access the rest of the fact sheets in this series, please click **here**.

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ACRONYMS

FDI	Foreign direct investment
GHG	Greenhouse gas
NCDs	Non-communicable diseases
SSBs	Sugar-sweetened beverages
UPF	Ultra-processed food

INTRODUCTION

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are becoming the backbone of so-called 'globalised diets', displacing healthier whole foods as the logical destination of corporate-industrial agri-food systems driven by the profit motive. Although they are mostly associated with diets in middle- or high-income countries, UPFs are also increasingly consumed in low-income countries including in Africa, where dietary patterns are shifting to more processed and less diverse diets.

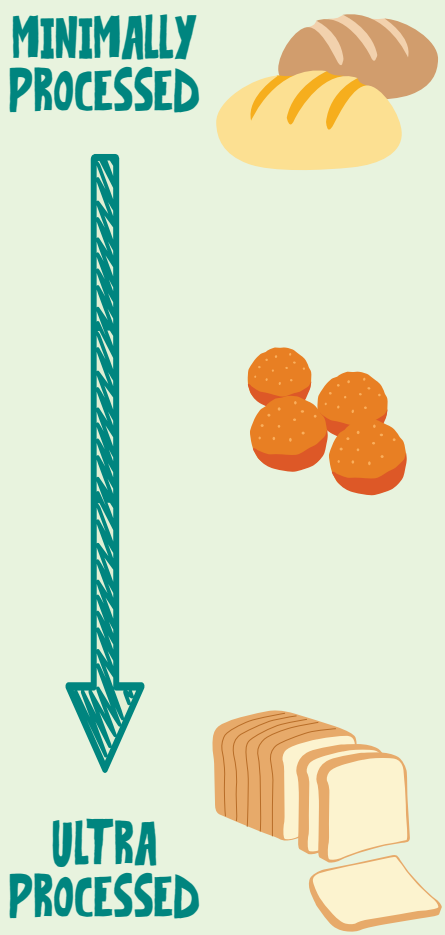
Affordability, accessibility, convenience and status are driving UPF expansion in low-income countries, as populations become more urbanised, with increased incomes from wage labour, and with less time available for food preparation.

Defining UPFs

UPFs are defined as products made from industrial processes using ingredients not typically found in household kitchens. They do not contain any whole foods, and are rather constructed from cheap, mass-produced and reconstituted ingredients (in particular salt, sugar and oils) and chemical additives. UPFs are unhealthy products whose formulation is primarily determined by low cost of production, profitability and "hyper-palatability" (designed to be quasi-addictive to encourage repeat consumption).

UPFs involve the separation of whole foods into their component parts, chemical modification, reassembly into modified substances, with chemical additives for cosmetic purposes and longer shelf life, and heavy use of single-use packaging.

Not all processed products are UPFs. The NOVA system classifies edible substances into four groups based on the extent and purpose of processing applied to them.



NOVA1 refers to unprocessed or minimally processed foods with no additions, where the main aim is to extend the storage life.

NOVA2 foods have added salt, sugar, oil or starch and are produced from NOVA1 foods. The main aim is to make their preparation and cooking easier.

NOVA3 processed foods combine NOVA1 and 2. The main aim is durability and enjoyment.

NOVA4 are ultra-processed foods. These are industrially formulated and include little if any intact Group 1 foods. They include additives and chemical processes and are designed as ready-to-eat and highly palatable. Examples include reconstituted meats, spreads, breakfast cereals, and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs).

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UPFs displace whole foods and are characterised by poor satiability (they do not satisfy hunger well). Their increasing consumption is resulting in a massive increase in dietary-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (e.g. diabetes, cancer, and gastrointestinal disorders). Their rise has led to a deterioration in the nutritional quality of overall diets, resulting in **a triple burden of malnutrition: the simultaneous overnutrition of calories, fats and carbohydrates, coupled with micronutrient deficiencies, and at a societal level found alongside the persistence of undernutrition (hunger, revealed in high levels of wasting and stunting, especially among children).**

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UPF consumption IN AFRICA

There is rising consumption of UPFs in Africa. The extent varies by urban/rural location, age, family structure and economic status among and within countries. Urban populations tend to purchase a greater share of their food than rural populations, and are hence more exposed to UPFs.
An estimated 38% of food consumed in urban areas and 14% in rural areas are UPFs.

There has been a significant increase in UPF consumption in recent decades, associated with trade liberalisation and minimum market access, and the promotion of industrialisation in agriculture and food policies.

Relative affordability (e.g., in some cases SSBs are cheaper than fruit and vegetables at any time of year), convenience (ready-to-eat, readily available), and palatability (taste and addictive qualities) all play a role in the increased uptake of UPFs.

The interplay between food environment and personal motivations shapes choices. Changing dietary patterns include a shift away from own food production and processing towards food purchases, more regular consumption of snack foods, and increasing purchases of ready-made meals.

Although informal street traders and markets remain very important channels for food access in Africa, they are operating in an environment that includes the rise of supermarkets, the penetration of global value chains, and corporate influence on policies directed towards the modernisation of food systems. Antipathy to the informal food sector tends to characterise government approaches, with policy incentives encouraging 'efficient', 'cheap' and 'modern' corporate food supply.

Corporate power

Multi-national food corporations have saturated middle- and high-income markets and seek new markets in the Global South. These corporations exhibit concentrated market power that includes predatory marketing (for example, targeting children, who are less able to make informed and reasoned choices about nutrition), lobbying, and private funding of scientific research. Corporations exert control over global production, processing and distribution networks based on economies of scale, privately-owned technologies, and management of logistics that raise significant barriers to entry for smaller food enterprises.

UPFs constitute a core strategy of profit maximisation with their longer shelf life, quasi-addictive ingredient formulation, and higher profit margins than healthier whole foods. There has been a massive growth in the number of corporations involved globally over the past few decades, and UPF production has come to dominate the entire food system globally.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in the production of alcohol, soft drinks and sugar products constitutes 22% of total FDI in Africa, more than double the investment in farms and plantations.

This has led to domestic production of UPFs through multinational corporate investment, accompanied by rising imports of UPFs. Corporate investments extract wealth from sales and channel them to shareholders outside the continent, including large financial institutions and management entities. Investments in UPF production has resulted in shifts in agricultural production towards bulk commodities for use in the formulation of UPFs including sugar, vegetable oils, maize, and soya, often supported by state subsidies to encourage investment.

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CORPORATE CAPTURE
of consumer markets

Market power enables corporations to:

set prices

determine the availability of food products

shape consumer behaviour

define the nutritional content of food and edible substances

market UPFs as healthy foods

Corporate marketing budgets outstrip government health budgets, and predatory marketing targeting children is rife. Corporations influence national policy through lobbying, incentives, and investments. Corporate activities are a source of tax income for governments so the latter often accept them, even offering concessions (e.g., tax breaks, subsidies, access to natural resources, and the creation of special economic zones) for investments in the national territory. Corporate social investment is used to gain influence over regulations and policies, especially on public health. Corporate lobbying has secured voluntary codes and self-regulation. Job creation is a big incentive for governments, but there is a severe trade-off with public health and the wider environmental damage that the corporate-industrial food system produces.

Private funding of scientific research especially into nutrition obscures health concerns (e.g., the argument that all calories are the same, or focusing on physical activity rather than diets). Corporations sponsor nutrition bodies and events, and even partner with governments to deliver nutrition programmes. Onerous standards and requirements (e.g., fortification) are imposed which exclude smaller producers.

Corporations control global integrated sourcing and production networks based on mergers and acquisitions, and establish local distribution networks to reach areas where supermarkets are not present.

Sponsorship of small traders doubles as advertising of corporate products. Corporate UPF manufacturers have a symbiotic relationship with supermarkets on issues such as standards, fees, and logistics capability. Supermarkets sell mass products at lower prices, and UPF corporations also channel their products through fast food chains. Capture and analysis of big data is used to shape market and consumer behaviour.

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EXPLOITING
socio-economic inequities

Undernourishment is widespread in Africa, with fully 78% of the population unable to afford healthy diets.

Food and agriculture policies are oriented towards large-scale agribusiness. Corporations are making massive profits in the food system, while hunger stalks the continent. This is a denial of the right to food and deepens existing inequalities in the food system. Cheap, often imported, UPFs that are more affordable than locally produced fresh foods represent a structural problem in the food system. UPFs have become part of everyday diets and are more difficult to control due to their addictive nature.

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Environmental IMPACTS

Research is lacking on the environmental impacts of UPF production, distribution and disposal that consider the full product lifecycle, across the entire food system.

Expansion of industrial agriculture and globalised food systems are major drivers of environmental degradation, including well-documented biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, land use change, soil degradation, water pollution, plastic pollution and proliferating waste. Expansion of production of cocoa and palm oils contribute significantly to deforestation. Conventional agriculture inputs (synthetic fertilisers and pesticides) are based on ecologically damaging mining, manufacturing and global transportation. Long supply chains are a major source of GHG emissions in the food system, and constitute a high proportion of energy and water use. Ultra-processed meat and dairy products have the highest GHG emissions, and the largest water and ecological footprints of all UPF. Industrial livestock production in the form of concentrated animal feed operations adds to this. The agricultural landscape is transformed from one sustained by on- and off-farm biodiversity to one that is reliant on homogeneity to meet industrial needs. The orientation to commodity crops for export or industrial processing leads to a higher transport footprint, monocultures, and increasing food imports.

Impacts on AGRICULTURAL BIODIVERSITY

Industrial production to produce feedstock for UPFs generate homogenisation of agricultural landscapes, with extensive land use change and displacement of biodiverse production systems. Standardised industrial processes requires commodity crop monocultures for UPF production, especially wheat, maize, soya, and oil seeds, as well as factory farming of fewer livestock breeds fed on concentrates from the same commodity crops. Production depends on a relatively small number of so-called high-yielding, export-oriented industrial crops and animal breeds.

75% of plant genetic diversity has been lost from farmers' fields due to the introduction of genetically uniform commercial seeds, limiting diversity, which is a key pillar of agroecology.

The orientation of seed laws to conform with the terms of the International Union for the Protection of New Plant Varieties (UPOV) 1991 undermines seed diversity by narrowing the available varieties that are produced and distributed. Major multilateral agreements – the Convention on Biological Diversity and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture – have failed to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION
impacts

The increasing consumption of UPF in Africa is linked to **what is called the triple burden of malnutrition, with a simultaneous rising incidence of overnutrition, undernutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies**. Their consumption leads to diet-related NCDs, which are chronic diseases not directly transmissible between people, with a long duration, a slow progression, and rarely being fully curable. Diet-related NCDs are a leading cause of death worldwide. They are set to overtake communicable, maternal, neonatal, and nutritional diseases combined as the leading cause of mortality in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030. The number of people in Africa who are living with diabetes, for example, is expected to reach 47 million by 2045, up from 19 million in 2019. UPFs are an increasing share of diets and displace less processed, more nutritious options. This significant public health concern in Africa comes at a time when countries are crippled by debt and austerity bites, and public funding to health is reduced to repay debts. This places great strain on under-resourced public health systems and imposes a cost on households, health services and the overall economy while corporations profit.

Low nutrition and high calorie content characterise UPFs. Nutrient composition, nutrient loss, extensive food processing, and chemical additives all generate negative health effects. Plastic packaging with carcinogenic or endocrine-disrupting properties can leach into foods before consumption. There are lifelong negative impacts resulting from malnutrition at gestational and early childhood stages. This is associated with poor maternal health and nutrition, and nutritionally weak complementary feeding, and can be irreversible.

SHORTCOMINGS
of current regulatory approaches

The food and beverage industry has largely succeeded in preventing the effective development, implementation, enforcement, or monitoring of mandatory regulations.

Nutrition is framed as a matter of individual responsibility. The norm is to have no restrictions on advertising. Corporations producing UPFs partner with schools and health bodies. Corporate regulatory capture has resulted in weak standards, poor industry adherence to voluntary codes, and powerful lobbies to water down any regulations. Industrialisation polices in Africa encourage and facilitate expansion of UPFs in diets.

Public interventions are primarily situated at the end of the product lifecycle through taxes, marketing restrictions, labelling requirements, and limits on certain ingredients. The main regulatory approach has been to target selected nutrients, such as salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats, and make these unhealthy options less affordable, ultimately reducing the quantity of these ingredients in

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products. These are important to slow rapid increases in consumption. However, this approach is often combined with shifting the blame and responsibility to personal behaviours, such as a lack of exercise. These interventions are also isolated from wider social and ecological impacts of UPFs.

Ten countries in Eastern and Southern Africa introduced SSB taxes between 2013-2019. The so-called 'sugar tax' in South Africa resulted in significant reductions in the consumption of sugar from SSBs, and did not have noticeable impact on employment, despite industry fearmongering. Countries have also imposed marketing restrictions and bans, especially that targeting children. But despite these important initiatives, corporate self-regulation and voluntary guidelines remain prevalent.

Brazil's Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE) offers a good example of an integrated approach to dealing with the proliferation of UPFs. It includes a 2009 law that requires that more than 30% of food procured for schools must come from local family farmers. This was followed up with regulations requiring a minimum of three servings of fruits and vegetables per week, and a prohibition on sugary drinks being provided at school meals. Further regulations specified a minimum of 75% of school meal funds must be spent on unprocessed or minimally processed foods. Brazil also imposed a ban on the advertising, sales, and promotion of UPF products in the workplace. Brazilian dietary guidelines state that a healthy diet must promote people's health and well-being and protect natural resources and biodiversity, thus integrating these elements in policy.

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CONCLUSIONS

UPFs mark the logical destination for the capitalist food system, where the ceaseless search for profit overrides the health and wellbeing of people and the environment.

Corporations have been able to use their power to shape trade and production policies, and have taken advantage of weak and indebted states, and precarious and survivalist-oriented populations, to insert their own interests and agendas into the food system.

Capitalism has led to the disintegration of the relationships between people and the living systems that sustain them. It has denuded the social relationships of reciprocity, mutual obligation and care between people. It is no surprise that it generates a food system premised on flogging life-destroying substances passed off as food in order to extract a cheap buck.

Piecemeal responses will be inadequate to overcome the multiple conditions that converge to permit this state of affairs to continue indefinitely. The current, and very apparent, inequity and unjust power relations must be tackled head on.

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Food sovereignty is the starting point, placing democratic deliberation, decision-making, planning and implementation at the heart of the food system. Ensuring the right to healthy, nutritious, diverse, environmentally sustainable, and culturally acceptable and appropriate food for all should be the central organising principle.

Integrated approaches to food and nutrition, health, agriculture, environmental degradation, poverty and inequality are required to turn the tide.

Policies must aim to effectively enhance production of and access to diverse foods and restrict the embeddedness of UPF, while strengthening local foodways and their ecological, social, and health benefits. Deliberate and sustained efforts should be made to reorient towards dietary patterns that are rich in varieties of plant-sourced, fresh and minimally processed food.

An agroecological food system transition places smallholder farmers, territorial markets, traditional retailers, consumers and the dynamic networks that facilitate the movement of produce at the centre, bridging urban and rural landscapes. Healthy food starts from healthy and diverse production. Policies that support ecological production, access to diverse seeds and animal breeds under the direct stewardship of farmers, and redistribution of land, water and other natural resources can strengthen alternatives to corporate imposed food systems.

Integrated approaches can incorporate key targets from the Global Biodiversity Framework, including:

in-situ conservation of wild and domesticated species (Target 4);

reducing pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals and other pollution, including plastics (Target 7);

shifting agriculture towards biodiversity-friendly practices, including agroecological approaches (Target 10);

sustainable consumption and reduction of food waste (Target 16); and

recognising the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, and human rights (Target 22 and Section C).

Agroecology discourses can be deepened to encompass the urban and consumers, and to cover the whole food system rather than focusing primarily on agricultural production. UPFs are an issue strongly related to agroecology principles both directly (e.g., social values, diets, participation, fairness, connectivity) and indirectly in relation to the knock-on impacts on farmer decisions on what to produce.

Mandatory transitionary measures should be put in place. Outright bans should be imposed on unhealthy foods in and around schools and hospitals; and in the market in general, marketing controls should be implemented – especially those targeting children– and taxes should be levied on UPFs, including the immediate expansion of taxes on SSBs to include all food products with excess sugar, salt and fats. UPF consumption should be discouraged and avoided in nutrition policies and national dietary guidelines.

There are examples globally, e.g., Brazil, Uruguay, Peru, Ecuador, and Malaysia. However these measures require regulations to ensure effective implementation, monitoring and penalties for non-compliance. Revenue raised from taxes could be ringfenced for use in subsidising the price of healthier food choices. Healthy foods should receive tax exemptions to improve access. Food standards currently focus on food safety. Risk assessment procedures should be extended to also address broader social, ecological, and public health considerations.