From Nova food classification to policy implementation: Latin American lessons for the sustainable diets agenda

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Latin America has become a major source of conceptual and evidence-informed policy innovation in response to the expansion of ultra-processed foods (UPFs).[1–3] Although much of this processing-based policy architecture emerged through public health and food and nutrition security sectors, it increasingly contributes to sustainable diets by incorporating explicit food-system objectives and generating broader sustainability co-benefits. This trajectory has unfolded amid rapid and uneven UPF expansion across the Americas, with traditional diets being progressively displaced by highly profitable, standardised, and globalised industrial products. These structural dynamics reinforce the need for policy responses tailored to different stages of this transition.[4]

Developed in Brazil, the Nova food classification helped move nutrition science beyond isolated nutrients and foods, contributing to a broader understanding of how industrial food processing reshapes dietary practices, food cultures, and food systems.[1,4] This conceptual change reframed UPFs not only as products associated with adverse health outcomes, but also as expressions of how contemporary food systems are organised.[4] By directing attention to how and why foods are formulated, produced, distributed, promoted, and embedded within food environments, Nova helped inform policies that extend beyond individual choice. The Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population translated this perspective into national recommendations centred on fresh or minimally processed foods, meals, culinary practices, and food culture, helping reposition dietary guidance within a broader understanding of health, society, and food systems.[1]

This conceptual contribution matters because UPF expansion extends beyond nutrition, posing a structural challenge across the health, environmental, sociocultural, and economic dimensions of sustainable diets. Although robust evidence has consistently linked high UPF consumption to multiple adverse health outcomes and all-cause mortality,[4] emerging research also indicates that the growing dietary contribution of UPFs is associated with increasing environmental pressures,[5] particularly beyond primary production, including industrial processing, packaging, and global distribution chains.[6] Moreover, the dietary standardisation promoted by these products can further weaken local food systems, shared meals, culinary practices, and the intergenerational transmission of food knowledge.[1] UPFs are also emblematic of the economic and political architecture sustaining contemporary food systems; transnational corporations exert growing influence over markets, food environments, and regulatory processes.[7] At the same time, their expansion is not socially neutral; while UPF intake affects all social strata, consumption is increasing most rapidly among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations.[2] A broader understanding of sustainable diets must therefore extend beyond nutrient composition and environmental outcomes to encompass equity, food cultures, and the social conditions that enable food preparation and eating practices.[7,8] A processing-based approach can help connect these dimensions with health outcomes, while drawing attention to the economic, political, and ecological relations that sustain UPF expansion.

Latin America has translated this conceptual shift into a broad policy architecture capable of linking processing-based guidance to wider food-system mechanisms (Panel 1). Food-based dietary guidelines have served as important policy anchors across the region, translating processing-based principles into recommendations that can inform regulatory, fiscal, procurement, and food-environment measures.[1–3] Front-of-package warning labels and fiscal measures targeting sugary drinks and selected unhealthy products in Mexico and Colombia represent population-wide attempts to reshape the conditions under which foods are promoted, purchased, and consumed.[2] School food environments have become another important field of action. Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, and Ecuador have developed measures regulating food availability, sales, or marketing in schools, showing how governments can move beyond information and education to intervene in institutional environments.[3] Although many of these policies were largely

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***Panel 1*: Ultra-processed foods within the global sustainable diets agenda: structural challenges and Latin American pathways.**

Structural challenges related to UPF expansion

- Environmental pressures: Expansion of monoculture-dependent supply chains, agrobiodiversity loss, and increased environmental impacts associated with industrial processing, packaging, and global distribution.
- Socioeconomic asymmetries: Concentration of economic benefits within transnational corporations alongside disproportionate social, environmental, and health burdens in vulnerable populations and countries.
- Cultural erosion: Displacement of local food systems, culinary practices, shared meals, and traditional knowledge.
- Commercial influence: Growing corporate influence over food environments, governance, and regulatory processes.

Latin American conceptual innovation, policy and implementation pathways

- Integrate food processing into sustainable diet frameworks: Ground national frameworks in processing-based classifications, such as the Nova food classification, to shift dietary guidelines toward agrobiodiversity and traditional food cultures.
- Fiscal and regulatory measures: Discourage ultra-processed products through front-of-package warning labelling implemented across the region, including in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, alongside targeted fiscal measures.
- Support food systems based on fresh and minimally processed foods: Promote local production, agrobiodiversity, and culturally appropriate food practices, leveraging healthy public procurement and school feeding programmes to align institutional demand with family farming.
- Protect public governance: Strengthen safeguards against conflicts of interest across the entire policy cycle, including formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, while preserving democratic, multi-sectoral spaces for social participation and policy oversight.

UPFs, ultra-processed foods.

designed to protect health, they can also influence procurement, supply, and the visibility of fresh or minimally processed foods.[2,3]

The Brazilian experience further illustrates how these policies can contribute to broader food-system transformation. The National School Feeding Programme combines restrictions on UPFs with procurement from family farming, linking institutional demand to local production.[9] Decree No. 11,821/2023 extends this agenda by establishing guidelines for adequate and healthy diets in public and private school environments. Its implementation has relied on technical support to subnational governments, intersectoral coordination, legal assistance, local mobilisation, and participation by school communities and civil society.[3] These mechanisms are important because policy adoption alone does not guarantee changes in food environments. Furthermore, Brazil's recently reformulated National Basic Food Basket excludes UPFs and prioritises fresh or minimally processed foods, while explicitly connecting the Basket's composition with sustainable production practices, environmental protection, regional food cultures, local production, and family farming.[10] Together, these initiatives show how policies grounded in public health and food and nutrition security principles and advanced through broader intersectoral governance can extend beyond dietary guidance to act on the wider organisation of food systems, influencing institutional demand, local production, dietary diversity, and food culture.

Implementation, however, is challenging. Translating national frameworks into practice often depends on subnational capacity, intersectoral coordination, sustained financing, social participation, monitoring, enforcement, and safeguards against commercial interference. Experiences in Brazilian school food environments show both the value of decentralised technical support and the resistance generated when regulations threaten the commercial interests of the ultra-processed food industry.[3,7] Similar tensions may affect fiscal, labelling, procurement, and food-environment policies, making protection of public governance a central implementation requirement.

Latin American processing-based policies occupy different positions along a continuum from health-oriented regulation to explicit food-system transformation. While many were initially designed around public health and food and nutrition security, newer initiatives increasingly integrate environmental protection, sustainable production, local supply, and sociobiodiversity. The region therefore does not offer a finished model, but an evolving set of experiences showing how health-oriented policy can be extended into other dimensions of sustainability, while also revealing where implementation and evaluation still need to advance. Latin America's experience suggests that the global sustainable diets agenda will remain incomplete unless it recognises ultra-processing as both a manifestation and a structural driver of unsustainable food systems, reflecting the connections between health, environment, culture, inequality, and corporate power. It is therefore essential to advance policies that make fresh, minimally processed, and culturally meaningful foods the accessible default.

Contributors

MSC and MCM conceptualised the manuscript and prepared the original draft. FSN, PCJ, LLM, EAFN, DSC and RMC contributed to manuscript review and editing. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the arguments, critically revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to its submission.

Declaration of interests

All authors declare no competing interests.

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