

Digitized “Ready to Eat”, Ultraprocessed Foods (UPFs) Worldwide: Millions Suffer as Junk Food Industry Rakes in Global Profits

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Increased consumption of ultraprocessed foods (UPFs) was associated with more than 10% of all-cause premature, preventable deaths in Brazil in 2019. That is the finding of a [new peer-reviewed study](#) in the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#).

The findings are significant not only for Brazil but also for high income countries such as the U S, Canada, the UK, and Australia, where UPFs account for more than half of total calorific intake.

Brazilians consume far less of these products than countries with high incomes. This means the estimated impact would be even higher in richer nations.

UPFs are ready-to-eat-or-heat industrial formulations made with ingredients extracted from foods or synthesised in laboratories. These have gradually been replacing traditional foods and meals made from fresh and minimally processed ingredients in many countries.

The study found that approximately 57,000 deaths in one year could be attributed to the consumption of UPFs – 10.5% of all premature deaths and 21.8% of all deaths from preventable noncommunicable diseases in adults aged 30 to 69.

The study’s lead investigator Eduardo AF Nilson states:

“To our knowledge, no study to date has estimated the potential impact of UPFs on premature deaths.”

Across all age groups and sex strata, consumption of UPFs ranged from 13% to 21% of total food intake in Brazil during the period studied.

UPFs have steadily replaced the consumption of traditional whole foods, such as rice and beans, in Brazil.

Reducing consumption of UPFs by 10% to 50% could potentially prevent approximately 5,900 to 29,300 premature deaths in Brazil each year. Based on this, hundreds of thousands of premature deaths could be prevented globally annually. And many millions more could be prevented from acquiring long-term, debilitating conditions.

Nilson adds:

“Consumption of UPFs is associated with many disease outcomes, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, some cancers and other diseases, and it represents a significant cause of preventable and premature deaths among Brazilian adults.”

Examples of UPFs are prepackaged soups, sauces, frozen pizza, ready-to-eat meals, hot dogs, sausages, sodas, ice cream, and store-bought cookies, cakes, candies and doughnuts.

And yet, due to trade deals, government support and WTO influence, transnational food retail and food processing companies continue to colonise markets around the world and push UPFs.

In Mexico, for instance, these companies have taken over food distribution channels, replacing local foods with cheap processed items, often with the direct support of the government. Free trade and investment agreements have been critical to this process and the consequences for public health have been catastrophic.

Mexico's National Institute for Public Health released the results of a national survey of food security and nutrition in 2012. Between 1988 and 2012, the proportion of overweight women between the ages of 20 and 49 increased from 25 to 35% and the number of obese women in this age group increased from 9 to 37%. Some 29% of Mexican children between the ages of 5 and 11 were found to be overweight, as were 35% of the youngsters between 11 and 19, while one in ten school age children experienced anaemia.

[The North America Free Trade Agreement](#) (NAFTA) led to the direct investment in food processing and a change in Mexico's retail structure (towards supermarkets and convenience stores) as well as the emergence of global agribusiness and transnational food companies in the country.

NAFTA eliminated rules preventing foreign investors from owning more than 49% of a company. It also prohibited minimum amounts of domestic content in production and increased rights for foreign investors to retain profits and returns from initial investments.

By 1999, US companies had invested 5.3 billion dollars in Mexico's food processing industry, a 25-fold increase in just 12 years.

US food corporations began to colonise the dominant food distribution networks of small-scale vendors, known as *tiendas* (corner shops). This helped spread nutritionally poor food as they allowed these corporations to sell and promote their foods to poorer populations in small towns and communities. By 2012, retail chains had displaced *tiendas* as Mexico's main source of food sales.

A spoonful of deceit

Turning to Europe, more than half the population of the European Union (EU) is overweight or obese. Without effective action, this number will grow substantially by 2026.

That warning was issued in 2016 and was based on the report [A Spoonful of Sugar: How the Food Lobby Fights Sugar Regulation in the EU](#) by the research and campaign group Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO).

CEO noted that obesity rates were rising fastest among lowest socio-economic groups. That is because energy-dense foods of poor nutritional value are cheaper than more nutritious foods, such as vegetables and fruit, and relatively poor families with children purchase food primarily to satisfy their hunger.

The report argued that more people than ever before are eating processed foods as a large part of their diet. And the easiest way to make industrial, processed food cheap, long-lasting and enhance the taste is to add extra sugar as well as salt and fat to products.

In the United Kingdom, the cost of obesity was estimated at £27 billion per year in 2016, and approximately 7% of national health spending in EU member states as a whole is due to obesity in adults.

The food industry has vigorously mobilised to stop vital public health legislation in this area by pushing free trade agreements and deregulation drives, exercising undue influence over regulatory bodies, capturing scientific expertise, championing weak voluntary schemes and outmaneuvering consumer groups by spending billions on aggressive lobbying.

The leverage which food industry giants have over EU decision-making has helped the sugar lobby to see off many of the threats to its profit margins.

CEO argued that key trade associations, companies and lobby groups related to sugary food and drinks together spend an estimated €21.3 million (2016) annually to lobby the EU.

While industry-funded studies influence European Food Standards Authority decisions, Coca Cola, Nestlé and other food giants engage in corporate propaganda by sponsoring sporting events and major exercise programmes to divert attention from the impacts of their products and give the false impression that exercise and lifestyle choices are the major factors in preventing poor health.

Katharine Ainger, freelance journalist and co-author of CEO's report, said:

"Sound scientific advice is being sidelined by the billions of euros backing the sugar lobby. In its dishonesty and its disregard for people's health, the food and drink industry rivals the tactics we've seen from the tobacco lobby for decades."

ILSI industry front group

One of the best known industry front groups with global influence is what a September 2019 report in the New York Times (NYT) called a "shadowy industry group" – the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI).

The institute was founded in 1978 by Alex Malaspina, a Coca-Cola scientific and regulatory affairs leader. It started with an endowment of \$22 million with the support of Coca Cola.

Since then, ILSI has been quietly infiltrating government health and nutrition bodies around the globe and has more than 17 branches that influence food safety and nutrition science in various regions.

Little more than a front group for its 400 corporate members that provide its \$17 million budget, ILSI's members include Coca-Cola, DuPont, PepsiCo, General Mills and Danone.

The NYT says ILSI has received more than \$2 million from chemical companies, among them Monsanto. In 2016, a UN committee issued a ruling that glyphosate, the key ingredient in Monsanto's weedkiller Roundup, was "probably not carcinogenic," contradicting an earlier report by the WHO's cancer agency. The committee was led by two ILSI officials.

From India to China, whether it has involved warning labels on unhealthy packaged food or shaping anti-obesity education campaigns that stress physical activity and divert attention from the food system itself, prominent figures with close ties to the corridors of power have been co-opted to influence policy in order to boost the interests of agri-food corporations.

As far back as 2003, [it was reported](#) by The Guardian newspaper that ILSI had spread its influence across the national and global food policy arena. The report talked about undue influence exerted on specific WHO/FAO food policies dealing with dietary guidelines, pesticide use, additives, trans-fatty acids and sugar.

In January 2019, two papers by Harvard Professor Susan Greenhalgh, in [the BMJ](#) and the [Journal of Public Health Policy](#), revealed ILSI's influence on the Chinese government regarding issues related to obesity. And in April 2019, Corporate Accountability released a report on ILSI titled [Partnership for an Unhealthy Planet](#).

A [2017 report](#) in the Times of India noted that ILSI-India was being actively consulted by India's apex policy-formulating body – Niti Aayog. ILSI-India's board of trustees was dominated by food and beverage companies – seven of 13 members were from the industry or linked to it (Mondelez, Mars, Abbott, Ajinomoto, Hindustan Unilever and Nestle) and the treasurer was Sunil Adsule of Coca-Cola India.

In India, ILSI's expanding influence coincides with mounting rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

In 2020, [US Right to Know](#) (USRTK) referred to a [study published in Public Health Nutrition](#) that helped to further confirm ILSI as little more than an industry propaganda arm.

The study, based on documents obtained by USRTK, uncovered "a pattern of activity in which ILSI sought to exploit the credibility of scientists and academics to bolster industry positions and promote industry-devised content in its meetings, journal, and other activities."

Gary Ruskin, executive director of USRTK, a consumer and public health group, said:

"ILSI is insidious... Across the world, ILSI is central to the food industry's product defence, to keep consumers buying the ultra-processed food, sugary beverages and other junk food that promotes obesity, type 2 diabetes and other ills."

The study also revealed new details about which companies fund ILSI and its branches.

ILSI North America's draft 2016 IRS form 990 shows a \$317,827 contribution from PepsiCo, contributions greater than \$200,000 from Mars, Coca-Cola and Mondelez and contributions greater than \$100,000 from General Mills, Nestle, Kellogg, Hershey, Kraft, Dr. Pepper Snapple Group, Starbucks Coffee, Cargill, Unilever and Campbell Soup.

ILSI's draft 2013 Internal Revenue Service form 990 shows that it received \$337,000 from Coca-Cola, and more than \$100,000 each from Monsanto, Syngenta, Dow AgroSciences, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Bayer Crop Science and BASF.

Global institutions, like the WTO, and governments continue to act as the administrative arm of industry, boosting corporate profits while destroying public health and cutting short human life.

Part of the solution lies in challenging a policy agenda that privileges global markets, highly processed food and the needs of 'the modern food system' – meaning the bottom line of dominant industrial food conglomerates.

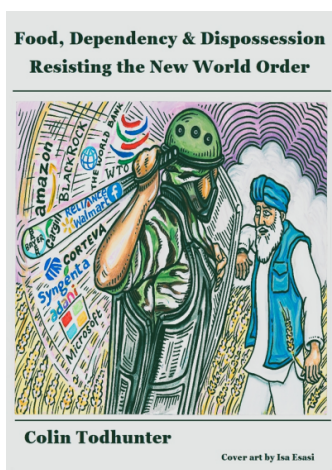
It also involves protecting and strengthening local markets, short supply chains and independent small-scale enterprises, including traditional food processing concerns and small retailers.

And, of course, we need to protect and strengthen agroecological, smallholder farming that bolsters nutrient-dense diets – more family farms and healthy food instead of more disease and allopathic family doctors.

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Read Colin Todhunter's e-Book entitled

Food, Dispossession and Dependency. Resisting the New World Order

We are currently seeing an acceleration of the corporate consolidation of the entire global agri-food chain. The high-tech/big data conglomerates, including Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Google, [have joined traditional agribusiness giants](#), such as Corteva, Bayer, Cargill and Syngenta, in a quest to impose their model of food and agriculture on the world.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is also involved (documented in '[Gates to a Global](#)

Empire’ by Navdanya International), whether through [buying up huge tracts of farmland](#), promoting a much-heralded [\(but failed\) ‘green revolution’ for Africa](#), pushing [biosynthetic food](#) and [genetic engineering technologies](#) or more generally [facilitating the aims of the mega agri-food corporations](#).

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