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Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

The Transformative Potential of Regulatory Policies in Food Systems to Achieve the SDGs

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Abstract

Recent economic crises, urbanization trends, territorial conflicts, climate emergencies, and the Covid-19 pandemic have intensified global concerns about food security, nutrition, and malnutrition. Alarming increases in hunger, alongside rising obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases, reflect the consequences of food systems overly reliant on staple cereal crops, frequently processed into inexpensive, unhealthy ultra-processed food products (UPFP). Access to healthy foods, including fruits and vegetables, has diminished, especially post-pandemic, while UPFP high in sodium, sugars, and fats are ubiquitous, more accessible and affordable. These dietary imbalances worsen public health, raise healthcare costs, reduce productivity, and slow economic growth, threatening the 2030 Agenda. Addressing these issues demands multi-sectoral policies engaging a wide range of stakeholders. Including academia, small growers, and social movements is crucial for evidence-based, equitable policies. A multisectoral approach is essential, and governments must set frameworks to mitigate conflicts of interest and prevent industry interference. To support healthier diets, regulatory measures promoting nutritious foods and discouraging unhealthy ones are needed. Policies like taxes on unhealthy foods, front-of-package warning labels, and marketing restrictions aligned with national dietary guidelines and food processing classifications have gained traction, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Tackling malnutrition is particularly difficult in this region, characterized by persistent poverty and inequality. Coordinating social and nutrition initiatives can enhance efforts to simultaneously address these interconnected issues.

Keywords: Food and nutrition security, non-communicable diseases, reducing inequalities, regulatory policies, food systems.

Introduction

Economic crises, rapid urbanization, territorial conflicts, climate emergencies and the Covid-19 pandemic have raised the level of alert on food and nutrition security and malnutrition outcomes all over the world. The alarming setbacks on hunger and the growing numbers of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCD), must be seen as part of the same picture. They are direct consequences of current food systems focused mainly on staple cereal crops which are then used in a wide variety of inexpensive and unhealthy ultra-processed food products (UPFP). Access to various foods such as fruits and vegetables has become more difficult, especially after the pandemic, whereas UPFP with excessive amounts of sodium, sugars and fats have become cheaper and more widely available. In addition to the climate impact, malnutrition effects increase health care costs, reduce productivity and slow economic growth, threatening progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Vulnerable groups have less access to health services, get sick and die prematurely, enlarging inequities and hampering efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Responses have to consider a set of policies ranging from production methods that stimulate diverse and culturally acceptable foods, to regulations that promote healthy food environments. Governments play a crucial role in ensuring that people have access to safe, affordable and healthy food. Only through the implementation of evidence-based strategies and regulatory measures will countries achieve a transformation in food systems and the fulfillment of the right to adequate and healthy food, especially for the most vulnerable populations. In this direction, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has been the cradle of innovative initiatives with the potential to reshape the current situation. This policy brief sets out drivers and policies examples in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia regarding food labeling, marketing, prices and institutional food environment.

Diagnosis of the Issue

In 2022, global hunger was affecting around 9.2% of the world population – around 735 million people – 122 million more than in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic. And, although the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity has recently decreased in some regions, such as Latin America, the situation in many regions has further deteriorated. By 2022, it is estimated that 29.6% of the world's population – 2.4 billion people – did not have access to adequate and healthy food. Yet, hunger and food insecurity are not the only perverse effects of malnutrition. Overweight, obesity, and other diet-related NCD contribute to 4 million deaths annually at the global level and put children and young people's growth and development at risk, shortening thousands of lives. Once considered a high-income country problem, overweight is on the rise in low- and middle-income countries. In LAC, the prevalence of overweight in children under five years of age reached 8.6% in 2022, which is 3% above the world estimate.

Food systems are definitely failing with people and the planet. Today's food systems rely on a high concentration of land, focused mainly on the production of commodity crops, high use of natural resources and the use of genetically modified organisms (GMO) and pesticides. Evidence shows that just 30 plants feed 95% of the calories consumed globally, with 60% of them coming from just three basic crops: rice, wheat and corn. In addition to the lack of dietary diversity, the commodity production chain is inseparable from the UPFP industry. This transformation in the countryside did not spare local and traditional diets, which are always healthier. Along with livestock farming, this production model causes a high environmental impact. In the same logic of optimizing profits, the UPFP industry is characterized by the loss of nutrients and grain refinement, adding critical ingredients in excess such as salt, sugar, fats and food additives (e.g.

flavors, colors, emulsifiers, thickeners etc.). Other notable characteristics are the high waste of natural resources and the food produced itself, which travels long distances and reaches consumers at higher prices, mainly through large retail chains to the detriment of small producers.

The absence of policies and regulatory measures favors the production, promotion and sale of products that are highly harmful to health - mostly UPFP - widening the inequality gap. The implementation of evidence-based strategies that regulate the food environment is necessary to achieve a transformation in food systems and to guarantee the right to adequate and healthy food, especially for the most vulnerable populations. International organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), strongly recommend the adoption and the strengthening of legal frameworks to protect and support healthy diets by incentivizing the consumption of healthy foods and discouraging the intake of unhealthy food as major strategies to tackle NCD. Examples of existing policies are: the adoption of understandable and informative front-of-package nutrition warning labels (FoPNWL), the taxation on UPFP, the subsidies to healthy foods, the restriction of the marketing of unhealthy food products directed at children, and the promotion of healthy food policies for institutional environments, especially schools. These strategies can be implemented by local governments up to the federal level and aim to reduce the availability, accessibility, affordability and purchase of unhealthy food products. Evidence has shown the effectiveness of these measures, in particular when combined with each other, especially in consumer behavior, with great potential in improving population's health and transforming food systems, stimulating dietary diversity and, therefore, varied production in the field, especially from small producers and family farming.

Implementing the above mentioned policies and expanding physical and financial access to healthy and sustainable food within the G20 countries would improve health outcomes and extend the life expectancy of hundreds of millions of people.

G20 countries have a disproportionately large responsibility, as they represent 60% of the world's agricultural land and about 80% of world trade in agricultural products. Within the 2030 Agenda, tackling malnutrition is a key element for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), namely SDG-2 – “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”, and is also essential for reaching out other SDG, such as SDG-1 - “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”. Their success also depends on progress in others, including SDG-3, SDG-5 and SDG-6. But, above all, access to healthy and adequate food is a fundamental right of all humanity and should be seen as such.

Recommendations

One of the first steps towards promoting health and reducing child illnesses is the protection of breastfeeding, the wisest natural strategy of bonding, affection, protection and nutrition for children. It constitutes the most sensitive, economical and effective intervention to reduce child morbidity and mortality in addition to effectively contributing to environmental sustainability and food and nutritional security. Such is the importance of this issue, decades ago the international community managed to mobilize the approval of a regulatory framework, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. This milestone alone does not make more women breastfeed their babies, but it is of crucial importance in raising the issue to its utmost importance and in providing legal bases. More than 70% of the WHO Member States have adopted legal measures to implement at least some of the provisions in the Code to protect the practice, placing clear legal (and ethical) limits to the advancement of the industry and possible negligence on the part of governments, among other minaces. Regulating the early childhood environment is a consensus among experts and, progressively, the scientific community has been consolidating evidence in relation to other strategies that have proven to be fundamental, especially in protecting the most vulnerable populations. Shifting the food supply to prices that encourage the consumption of healthier and sustainable diets and moving away demand for the less healthy food products is not simple and will not happen without some type of intervention.

In Brazil, two recent presidential decrees went beyond the barriers of the health sector and imposed criteria related to the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population (DGBP), published in 2014. The DGBP included, among its recommendations, the guidance to give preference to natural and minimally processed foods and avoid UPFP.

It also poses concerns about sustainability and the appreciation of traditional knowledge in the process of making dietary decisions. Among the challenges of implementing dietary guidelines such as the DGBP is that of going beyond the limits of the health sector and serving as a recommendation document for other related public policies, such as agricultural policies. In this regard, a first presidential Decree aligns the recommendations of the DGBP with the o National School Feeding Program (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar - PNAE), prohibiting the purchase of UPFP in school meals, covering more than 42 million students. The second decree disposed of the composition of the National Basic Food Basket (Cesta Básica Nacional de Alimentos), prohibiting UPFP and incorporating exclusively fresh and minimally processed foods, that are representative of the country's sociobiodiversity. Knowing that the income of the most vulnerable people is often compromised by the purchase of food, the measure protects this population from the consumption of UPFP, most of which are cheaper and more accessible than fresh foods. It is a good example of how the State can induce food and nutritional security policies to be healthy and sustainable, based on the DGBP.

Also recently (October, 2021), in Argentina, the Healthy Food Promotion Law (HFPL - Law no 27642) was enacted. This comprehensive law goes beyond the FoPNWL. It also includes measures to promote healthy school food environments and regulate food procurement. The standard establishes the inclusion of black octagons with white borders and letters that provide warnings about excess sugars, total and saturated fats, sodium, and calories. In addition, the standard includes two legends: "contains sweeteners not recommended for children" and "contains caffeine, avoid in children". Argentina is the second country in the region after Mexico to reach the highest standards of FoPNWL regulation, incorporating the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) nutrient profile model as a parameter to establish the products that must carry warnings, and restricting

elements of persuasion in those products. The law also includes the mandatory inclusion of food and nutrition education in schools, and the prohibition of offering, marketing, promoting and sponsoring products that contain FoPNWL at schools. Regarding food advertising, sponsorship and promotion regulations, the law prohibits all forms of child-directed marketing, including traditional media channels, digital marketing, schools, and out-of-home marketing. Argentina is also the only country that explicitly regulates influencers in its legislation. Lastly, regarding food procurement, the law establishes that the government should prioritize foods without the FoPNWL in public food procurement. The HFPL is a nationwide and public order regulation, but to ensure its correct implementation, the approval of complementary norms at the subnational level is necessary.

In Colombia, achieving the implementation of the #JunkFoodLaw - FoPNWL took five years from its definition in 2017 to its implementation in 2022, a journey where civil society organizations and academics, with international technical and economic support, faced strong interference from the industry, but ultimately managed to promote healthy food environments by providing clear, truthful, timely, visible, appropriate, and sufficient information about the ingredients of ultra-processed food and drink products (UPFP). Similarly, the healthy tax on sugary drinks and ultra-processed food products (UPFP) with excess sugar, sodium, and saturated fats, which became law in November 2022, began its implementation in November 2023 and will be fully enforced by January 2025.

It is still early to see results, but initial surveys indicate that FoPNWL has helped 36% of people make healthier food choices and 54% of them view it positively. Achieving these two regulations has been a long effort in the country and a constant struggle of Civil Society Organizations against the industry's interference in the decision-making spaces. Currently, the attempts of the opponents to overthrow what we have achieved are still

happening, and this is a scenario that we do not see close to change in the country, therefore, from the Civil Society Organizations we continue to follow up and monitor any initiative against the measures achieved, and likewise, facing the demand of the obligations of government entities responsible for ensuring the proper implementation. Additionally, according to the Quality of Life Survey of 2023, people perceive having greater access to healthy and nutritious food, and less concern about not having enough food (DANE, 2024). However, the country still needs to make significant progress in regulating school food environments and marketing restrictions.

Scenario of Outcomes

Adopting, strengthening and enforcing regulatory measures can protect, promote and support healthy diets, encouraging the consumption of healthy foods and discouraging the intake of unhealthy foods, further contributing to food systems transformation. The adoption of fiscal measures to fight malnutrition, such as taxation on unhealthy foods, FoPNWL and marketing restrictions based on national dietary guidelines and the food processing classification has received much attention and is being implemented in several countries in the LAC region.

The implementation of comprehensive policies that change food environments, thereby decreasing the affordability, availability, and accessibility of UPFP, will not only reduce the consumption of these unhealthy food products but also serve as a catalyst for changes in other dimensions of the food system, increasing the demand for healthy and sustainable foods. The implementation of regulations that encompass various aspects of the food environment is considered crucial to advance the policy landscape in the country and underscore the necessity of establishing interconnected policies that complement each other. However, implementing comprehensive policies may present challenges related to the institutional capacity of the State and the necessity of working cohesively with various agencies and ministries. An approach that prioritizes health across all sectors must be adopted to achieve coordinated actions

Changes in food systems require multi sectoral policies involving a diverse array of stakeholders. The inclusion of academia, small growers and social movements is key to guaranteeing evidence-based and equitable policies. The multisectoral and multistakeholder approach is essential for developing and implementing effective

policies. However, it is imperative that governments establish a clear framework to mitigate conflicts of interest and prevent interference from the industry.

LAC countries continue to grapple with significant challenges related to poverty and inequality. Argentina, Colombia, and Brazil have implemented social safety nets for vulnerable populations, but it is crucial for these policies to recognize the intrinsic link between malnutrition and poverty. Incorporating a nutrition perspective is essential, leveraging both nutrition and social programs to address these issues effectively.

Key recommendations for G20 Countries:

- Acknowledge the necessity of implementing policies that regulate the food environment through enforceable laws and binding regulations.
- Endorse the creation of institutional spaces where various agencies and Ministries can collaborate to develop cohesive policies aimed at ensuring access to healthy foods for all segments of the population.
- Adopt a food system perspective that recognizes the importance of addressing changes throughout the entire supply chain.
- Identify strategic national priorities for evaluating and monitoring the impact of different regulatory approaches, with the aim of identifying and promoting best practices.
- Develop policies that facilitate the participation of non-state actors in the development of food policies, emphasizing the inclusion of multiple stakeholders and measures to mitigate conflicts of interest and corporate influence.

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