

The processed food revolution in African food systems and the double burden of malnutrition

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) food systems and diets are rapidly changing, resulting in different patterns of diet related disease. Increasingly, in developing regions, we are now witnessing the double-burden of undernutrition and overweight/obesity. This double burden of malnutrition (DBM) co-exists within households and within populations. In SSA, the DBM is particularly significant, with a moderate decline in high levels of stunting, alongside a moderate increase in people living with overweight/obesity reported in the past two decades. The increase in people living with overweight/obesity is linked to high consumption of ultra- processed foods (UPF), and other social and economic factors. Previous research has been fragmented with a focus on the 2000's and 2010's. The paper reviews evidence over the last five decades to highlight the links between the DBM and the food system.

In this paper, UPF are classified as industrially manufactured foods compared to highly processed traditional foods which are classified as processed foods. In SSA the prevalence of people living with stunting in addition to obesity and overweight is at severely high levels. Furthermore, the increased consumption of processed food is not confined to the urban middle class but among urban and rural areas as well as middle and poorer classes. Investment in small and medium enterprises (SME's)) has made processed foods cheaper. It also appears that the supply of UPF is mainly domestic rather than deriving from external imports.

Overall, the policy implications of findings are complex. There is the challenge of managing the consumption of unhealthy foods and at the same time encouraging SME growth and employment. There is opportunity for dual interventions to address both undernutrition and overweight/obesity.

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