

Processed foods: their impact on the health and livelihoods of people around the world

The battle against hunger and malnutrition will not end as long as the logic of the market prevails and profit is sought at any cost, with the result that food is relegated to a mere commercial product subject to financial speculation and with little regard for its cultural, social and indeed symbolic importance. -- Pope Francis World Food Day Message, October 16, 2019

Industrial food production, which we considered last week, has contributed to massive dietary changes over the years. Much of what we eat today is highly processed and includes ingredients that may be unrecognizable and unpronounceable. Highly processed foods are attractive because they are convenient, cheap and tasty. Nevertheless, a diet high in processed foods is linked to the rise in non-communicable diseases including type 2 diabetes, some cancers, cardiovascular disease and obesity. In the United States today one third of adults are obese, defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) equal to or greater than 30. In some low-income countries obesity exists side by side with malnutrition.

Processed foods often contain high concentrations of sugar, salt and fat. For example, an eight ounce frozen dinner (Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes) has 990 milligrams of sodium, 41% of a day's recommended sodium intake. High fructose corn sweetener (made from subsidized corn) adds empty calories to many foods and beverages. Processed foods are also aggressively marketed, especially to children.

Because they are cheap, tasty and have a long shelf-life, processed foods are often the **only foods available in low-income neighborhoods** where convenience stores, dollar stores and gas stations are the only places to purchase food. The disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on communities of color is related to the high incidence of underlying health issues that stem from systemic poor nutrition. Institutional racism is deeply imbedded in our food system.

As markets in the industrialized world become saturated, food multinationals **seek new markets** for their products. Trade agreements have made it easier for companies to export food and local populations find these foods attractive and associate them with an affluent Western lifestyle. Unfortunately, countries are beginning to see some of the adverse health

impacts already evident in Western countries including increasing levels of obesity. In many ways this is just the latest chapter in the ongoing history of colonialism.

Reflection questions

- Have I reflected on the role that processed foods play in my diet?
- How can I advocate for access to affordable, nutritious foods in my neighborhood, city?
- How can I challenge food manufacturers to produce healthier food?

ACTION: Develop a menu of meals for this week that avoids processed foods as much as possible, then consider how you can make such meal planning part of your ongoing routine.