

There is a sentence in The *Lancet*'s new series on ultra-processed foods (UPFs), published this week, that makes clear exactly what the issue with them is. It says that UPFs are;

*emblematic of a food system increasingly controlled by transnational corporations that prioritise corporate profit ahead of public health.*

That is not a nutritional observation. It is a political economy diagnosis. And it is one that governments have been unwilling to make for far too long, although the need to do so has been apparent; I have been discussing this issue for some time.

Let me spell this out then: we do not eat UPFs because we lack willpower. We eat them because corporate power has redesigned our food environment to make UPFs unavoidable, cheap, aggressively marketed, and engineered to undermine our capacity to choose better. That is the heart of the matter. We are living with a food system that is designed to undermine our health in pursuit of corporate profit, and that is exactly what it is achieving at enormous costs to us and the state.

This needs some unpacking, as the issue is deeply significant, not least for the future health of the people of this country and the ever-growing costs of the NHS, which UPFs are fuelling.

## ***What UPFs really are***

The ***Lancet*** series repeats what many public health researchers have been warning for a decade: UPFs are not simply “foods that are high in sugar or fat”. They are industrial formulations built from commodity crops like maize, wheat, soy and palm oil, which are processed into extracts, powders, stabilisers and additives, and then combined with colourings and flavourings, before being packaged in plastic and sold as food, when they are nothing like that which we ate only a few decades ago, and throughout human life until then. This is not food; it is an industrial product designed for shelf life, transport efficiency, and profit margin. And our bodies are not adapted to survive on them. That is the problem.

Critics claim that the UPF category is too broad because it includes fortified cereals and flavoured yoghurts (which, in my opinion, are most definitely UPFs). But this misses the point entirely. UPFs rarely exist as individual products: they form dietary patterns. Once they enter a household, they displace real food. The harm to health arises from the system. And the system is now dominant.

In the UK, around half of all calories consumed come from UPFs. In many poorer countries, consumption is rising at alarming rates as global corporations push aggressively into newly “liberalised” markets. Ultra-processing is becoming the world’s default diet.

### ***The political economy of engineered diets***

What the **Lancet** shows is that UPF consumption is not an accident. It is the result of concentrated corporate power.

A tiny handful of transnational corporations – Nestlé, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Unilever and a few others – dominate the global market. Their business model depends on turning cheap commodities into branded substances with high retail margins. And because their profits depend on volume, they market UPFs with relentless intensity, often targeting children, women, and lower-income households.

They also make them addictive, to the extent that they are designed so that they do not satisfy the craving for food for long, leading to excess consumption when that is not required, with the obesity epidemic being the inevitable result.

The consequences are profound:

- \* Chronic disease has become a corporate externality. Obesity, diabetes, heart disease and gut disorders are rising because our food environments have been re-engineered around industrial ingredients. The NHS pays the bill. The corporations collect the profit.

- \* Inequality shapes what people eat. People on lower incomes eat UPFs not because they prefer them but because the alternatives are unaffordable, inaccessible, or simply absent. Cheap calories have replaced nutritious meals because wages are low, rents are high, and time is scarce.

- \* Planetary health is collateral damage. Industrial processing is fossil-fuel intensive; global supply chains are carbon heavy; and UPFs are wrapped in plastic. These harms are baked into the system.

This is not a consumer-choice problem. It is a structural problem created by deregulation and a food industry allowed to act without constraint.

What a government that cared would do

The **Lancet** recommendations are clear. They call for a comprehensive, state-led response that takes corporate power seriously. That means:

- \* Proper regulation. This requires:
  - \* Front-of-pack warning labels.
  - \* Limits on additives that signal ultra-processing.
  - \* Marketing bans aimed at children, and
  - \* Restrictions on UPFs in schools, hospitals, and public institutions.
  - \* Real competition policy would require an end to industry self-regulation. Dominant firms will need to be broken up if need be. Mergers that have concentrated market power must be stopped.
  - \* UPFs must be taxed to reflect their social and health costs. The revenue should be used to subsidise whole foods and minimally processed meals so that low-income households are better off, not worse. Positive VAT rates on UPFs and negative VAT rates on real foods (an idea currently unused, but which is technically possible) could help address this issue, creating significant price differentials in the process.
  - \* Rewriting agricultural policy could end subsidies that funnel public money into commodity crops used for ultra-processing. Support for local producers, horticulture, community kitchens, and short supply chains should be provided instead.
  - \* Protecting the vulnerable is essential, meaning that any UPF strategy must be designed with equity at its core. Cheap industrial calories have replaced real food because wages have been suppressed, childcare is unaffordable, and time poverty is endemic. You cannot change diets without changing the economic conditions that shape eating.
- In short, governments must treat UPF consumption as the predictable outcome of corporate design and not a failure of individual choice.

### ***What this tells us about the state we live in***

What worries me most is that the UPF crisis mirrors almost every other crisis we face.

Whether we are talking about fossil fuels, financial markets, private equity in social care, or the rentier takeover of housing, the pattern is the same: concentrated corporate power reshapes markets and society until the public carries the cost and the private sector keeps the rewards.

UPFs are simply the edible version of neoliberalism.

If we are serious about rebuilding public health, we cannot do it without rebuilding democratic control over the economy. That means acknowledging that food, and all its health consequences, is too important to be left to markets designed around shareholder return.

### ***Where this leaves us***

The ***Lancet*** is right: this requires a coordinated global response. But in the UK, we do not have to wait for the world. A government with courage could act tomorrow. It could pursue the agenda I noted above.

If it does not act, the cost will not simply be measured in NHS budgets. It will be

measured in the lives shortened, the communities hollowed out, and the ecological damage that follows from a food system designed for profit rather than care.

Ultra-processed food is the predictable outcome of an economic system that treats people as consumers first and people second. Changing that is not a dietary project. It is a democratic one. And it is long overdue.

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### ***Taking further action***

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

***One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.***

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### ***AI: How to use it as a campaigner***

We have produced a guide on how to use AI as a campaigner, for which we're already getting good feedback. It's available [as a free download here](#). ***Take a look. We think you'll find it useful.***

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