
Advocates hope Rio's ban on ultra-processed foods in schools triggers wave

Staff from civil society organisation Instituto Desiderata at the Rio de Janeiro vote on the bill to ban ultra-processed foods in the city's schools © Instituto Desiderata.

A bill passed by Rio de Janeiro City Council in June 2023 to ban the sale of ultra-processed foods in public and private schools can motivate other cities in Brazil to take similar action, advocates for healthy eating are hoping.

When Mayor Eduardo Paes signed the bill into law on [11 July](#) [1], Rio became the second city in the State of Rio de Janeiro to adopt such a measure, following Niterói in January 2023. It means that foods with high levels of sugar and fat, such as cookies, candies, and soft drinks, will no longer be permitted in school environments. The 1,500-plus schools in Rio will have 180 days to adapt to the law.

Technically, public schools already face a ban on ultra-processed foods, since they must follow the Brazilian School Feeding Programme, which itself is bound by the government's Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population, explains Paula Johns, Co-Founder and Executive Director of ACT Promoção da Saúde.

A domino effect

“It is fantastic that private schools will also be part of the efforts to protect children in the school environment and follow the recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines,” adds Johns. “There are other cities that have good regulations, but have not been visible. This initiative will help to generate momentum that can produce a domino effect, like we saw with smokefree legislation in the past.”

Brazil is one of many Latin American countries that are taking the global lead in tackling ultra-processed foods by requiring labels on the front of food packages, starting with [Chile in 2016](#) [2]. Two years later Chile saw a 26.7% decrease in high-sugar purchases, 36.7% in high-sodium purchases, and 23.8% in high-fat purchases. Such foods contribute to obesity, which is a major risk factor for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

After a strong campaign led by civil society, Mexican legislators — Senators in 2021 and Deputies in 2023 — [unanimously approved a law](#) [3] to eliminate industrially-produced trans fatty acids (iTFA) from the Mexican food

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supply. Trans fats, a common ingredient in processed foods, are responsible for more than 13,000 deaths yearly in the country.

The food and beverage industry is increasingly concentrated within large multinationals that have enormous political, economic and social power over countries. For instance, the top 10 food and beverage companies control 80% of store-bought food products worldwide, with over US\$100 billion in combined profits every year. Three-fourths of these companies obtain most of their [revenues from ultra-processed foods](#) [4].

In Rio, schools that violate the new law will be given 10 days to comply, after which they face fines of US\$ 308 (R\$ 1,500) a day, according to a [media report](#) [5]. It added that research done in 200 schools in the city found that ultra-processed foods were 126% more available in canteens than foods without any degree of processing.

“The approval of the bill that prohibits the sale of ultra-processed foods in public and private schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro demonstrates that Umané's support and engagement in advocacy and policy communication fronts are crucially important to achieving our social objective of contributing to a more effective health system and improving the quality of life of the Brazilian population,” said Evelyn dos Santos, Partnerships and New Projects Manager at [non-profit Umané](#) [6].

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Tags: [ultra-processed food](#) [7]

[obesity](#) [8]

[malnutrition](#) [9]

[unhealthy diets](#) [10]

[nutrition](#) [11]

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Links

- [1] <https://desiderata.org.br/rio-de-janeiro-on-the-road-to-healthier-schools/>
- [2] <https://ncdalliance.org/news-events/news/chile-when-overweight-prevalence-decreases-so-will-ncd-deaths>
- [3] <https://ncdalliance.org/news-events/blog/consensus-for-health-no-more-trans-fats-in-mexico>
- [4] <https://ncdalliance.org/news-events/blog/un-food-systems-summit-multistakeholderism-requires-good-governance>
- [5] <https://folhanobre.com.br/2023/06/14/rio-approves-project-banning-ultra-processed-foods-in-schools/374182/>
- [6] <https://umane.org.br/en/>
- [7] <https://ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/97>
- [8] <https://ncdalliance.org/category/tags/obesity>
- [9] <https://ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/228>
- [10] <https://ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/1334>
- [11] <https://ncdalliance.org/category/tags/nutrition>
- [12] <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/risk-factors-prevention/unhealthy-diets-and-malnutrition>