

EDITORIAL

Beyond ultra-processed foods: the new direction of the basic food basket in Brazil

Monica Cattafesta^a, Luciane Bresciani Salaroli^b



^aGraduate Program in Nutrition and Health, Federal University of Espírito Santo, Vitória/ES, Brazil;

^bGraduate Program in Collective Health, Graduate Program in Nutrition and Health, Federal University of Espírito Santo, Vitória/ES, Brazil;

Corresponding author

lucianebresciani@gmail.com

Orcid authors:

^aORCID: 0000-0002-8973-622X

^bORCID: 0000-0002-1881-0306

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Abstract

Decree 11.936/2024 initiates a significant transformation in the Brazilian basic food basket, focusing on encouraging healthier and more sustainable eating habits. By prioritizing whole foods and restricting ultra-processed foods, it aligns with nutritional policy guidelines and tax reform, demonstrating a commitment to public health and food sustainability. The document reconciles with the recommendations set forth by the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population, which emphasizes seasonality, family farming, local and regional traditions, biodiversity, and environmental respect essential elements for food and nutritional security that offer direct benefits to public health. Through this approach, it seeks to guide the population towards balanced eating practices, ensuring access to nutritionally adequate and sustainable food, especially for the most vulnerable segments of society.

Keywords: industrialized foods, food processed, in natura foods, food and nutritional health promotion, food security.

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With the enactment of Decree 11.936/2024, the Federal Government proposes a substantial transformation of the basic food basket, aiming to encourage healthier eating practices among Brazilians¹. This update, prioritizing the inclusion of whole foods and limiting the availability of ultra-processed products, aligns strategically with the guidelines of the recent tax reform, in its principles related to the preservation of the environment, health, and social sustainability. Additionally, this measure is in accordance with the recommendations set forth by the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population², the Dietary Guidelines for Children Under Two Years of Age³, and the National Policy on Food and Nutrition⁴, highlighting the commitment to public health and the sustainability of food systems.

The reformulation of the basic food basket emerges in a global context marked by concerning shifts in dietary consumption patterns, characterized by a decrease in the intake of nutritious foods — such as fruits, vegetables, and grains — and an increase in the consumption of oils, sugary beverages, and ultra-processed products⁵. In Latin America, this trend is evidenced by the consumption of sugary foods and beverages at quantities up to three times higher than recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO)⁶, a pattern contributing to a significant rise in the consumption of salt, refined carbohydrates, and snacks, alongside a consequent decrease in the intake of fruits, vegetables, and legumes⁷. In line with this, the Brazilian diet has undergone significant changes over the last few decades, with a reduction in the consumption of legumes, roots, and tubers, and an increase in the intake of meats, dairy products, sugars, soft drinks, and other ultra-processed foods⁸. Concurrently, there has been an increase in spending on eating out and a trend towards a preference for ready-to-eat foods, with a concerning decline in the use of food ingredients for cooking^{9,10}. Data from the 2017-2018 Family Budget Survey (POF) indicate that, although Brazilians still maintain a traditional pattern based on rice, beans, meat, and coffee, with the exception of the latter, there was a significant reduction in the consumption of these items, especially beans. Furthermore, a low consumption of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products was identified, while ultra-processed foods contributed to 19.7% of the total calories consumed¹¹.

Before detailing the changes made to the basic food basket, it is imperative to contextualize the reader regarding the terminology of "in natura foods" and "ultra-processed foods." These terms originate from the food classification proposed by Monteiro *et al.*⁸, which considers the degree and purpose of food processing. This classification, aligned with the transformations of global food systems¹², forms the basis of the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population². The NOVA classification, an acronym for this categorization, allows for the grouping of food and food products into four distinct groups: in natura and minimally processed foods; processed culinary ingredients; processed foods; and ultra-processed foods¹³. In natura and minimally processed foods comprise edible parts of plants or animals, water, mushrooms, and seaweeds, freshly extracted from nature and subjected to minimal processes of cleaning and packaging. Processed

culinary ingredients include substances obtained directly from foods of the first group or from nature, consumed as components of culinary preparations. Processed foods are manufactured by adding salt, sugar, or other processed culinary ingredients to a in natura food. Ultra-processed foods are industrial formulations typically composed of five or more ingredients, including substances rarely used in home cooking practices, as well as additives with the purpose of replicating the sensory qualities of minimally processed foods or their culinary preparations, or even to mask undesirable aspects of the final product^{2,8,13}.

According to the NOVA classification, the evaluation of foods goes beyond the simple processed versus unprocessed dichotomy, taking into account the nature and purpose of the processing. The central issue does not lie in the processing per se, but in the proportion and impact of ultra-processed foods in the diet. These foods, rich in sugar, starch, sodium, and unhealthy fats, result in a lower intake of essential nutrients and are associated with health issues such as obesity, hypertension, cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases due to their nutritional imbalance and high energy density¹⁴⁻¹⁹.

Given the relevance of the information presented, the need to modify the Brazilian basic food basket becomes evident. Under the auspices of Decree 11.936/2024¹, the new basic food basket proposal encompasses ten essential food groups, promoting diversity and nutritional quality by excluding ultra-processed items and favoring the selection of minimally processed foods, such as legumes, cereals, roots, vegetables, fruits, meats, dairy products, sugars, salt, oils, and beverages like coffee and tea. This initiative aims to guide the population towards a balanced and nutritionally rich diet, prioritizing the pillars of Brazilian cuisine, such as beans, cereals, roots, and tubers, while also highlighting the importance of vegetables, fruits, and nuts, and excluding ultra-processed versions of these foods, like stuffed biscuits, instant noodles, cake mixes, and ready-made sauces. In place of ultra-processed options, the basket suggests choices with simple and natural ingredients and recommends the use of fresh or dehydrated herbs and spices to enhance the flavor of culinary preparations, demonstrating an effort to promote healthy eating habits. The change also promotes the inclusion of foods typical of each region and Non-Conventional Food Plants (PANCs)²⁰.

The reformulation of the Brazilian basic food basket represents an opportunity to improve the population's diet, particularly for those in social vulnerability. The tax reform, by exempting taxes on fundamental items, promises to make quality food more accessible, directly addressing the problem of inadequate food consumption. Notably, a large proportion of Brazilians (87%) fails to meet the recommended fruit intake, with this deficiency being more pronounced among individuals with lower income, lower educational attainment, the youth, and those of brown and black skin colors¹¹. Furthermore, promoting healthy eating by reducing the intake of saturated fats, trans fats, salt, and added sugars found in ultra-processed foods has the potential to substantially decrease the diseases and mortalities associated with unbalanced diets^{16,21-24}.

In addition to the interventions already mentioned, this text proposes further strategies to adapt to changes in dietary patterns. A fundamental measure involves strengthening food systems, focusing on the production and access to healthy foods^{7,25,26}. This entails the creation and promotion of sustainable and health-beneficial business models²⁶, without necessarily reducing agricultural production. The goal is to stimulate the supply and sale of these foods, making them more accessible and profitable, which, in turn, discourages the marketing of health-damaging products⁷. Essentially, it is necessary to limit the influence of large commercial conglomerates on public policies, aiming at the implementation of guidelines that benefit public and environmental health, such as respecting food seasonality, valuing family farming, investing in organic, agroecological, and/or biodynamic farming techniques, considering local and regional traditions, biodiversity, and respecting the environment²⁶. Additionally, it is recommended to establish pacts for reducing the calorie, fat, sodium, and sugar content in industrialized foods⁵. All these strategies are vital components for food and nutritional security and offer direct benefits to public health²⁶.

In this way, the update of the Brazilian basic food basket, delineated by Decree 11.936/2024, signifies

an innovative progression in fostering a healthy and sustainable dietary standard. This editorial not only elaborates on the proposed changes and their potential impacts but also highlights the significance of integrated strategies and consistent public policies in confronting contemporary nutritional and environmental challenges.

In addition to significant transformations in the Brazilian basic food basket and advancements in promoting healthy and sustainable eating, this edition of the journal presents a collection of studies reflecting the importance and urgency of transdisciplinary approaches in current scientific research.

The diversity of the subjects addressed mirrors the complexity of challenges within the field of public health. Through a transdisciplinary approach, the studies highlight the interconnection between health, nutrition, environment, and society, reaffirming the transdisciplinary nature of the Journal of Human Growth and Development as a crucial vehicle for scientific dissemination and the recording of ideas and current research proposals in the field of public health²⁷⁻⁴¹. Therefore, we invite our readers to explore these articles, which not only complement the central theme of this edition but also broaden our understanding of the complex dynamics that influence health and well-being in modern societies.

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Resumo

O Decreto 11.936/2024 inicia uma transforma o significativa na cesta b sica brasileira, com foco no incentivo a uma alimenta o mais saud vel e sustent vel. Ao priorizar alimentos in natura e restringir os ultraprocessados, alinha-se  s diretrizes de pol ticas de nutri o e   reforma tribut ria, o que manifesta o compromisso com a sa de p blica e a sustentabilidade alimentar. O documento concilia-se  s recomenda es estabelecidas pelo Guia Alimentar para a Popula o Brasileira, o qual real a a sazonalidade, a agricultura familiar, as tradi es locais e regionais, a biodiversidade e o respeito ao meio ambiente elementos essenciais para a seguran a alimentar e nutricional e que oferecem benef cios diretos   sa de p blica. Por meio dessa abordagem, busca-se conduzir a popula o para pr ticas alimentares balanceadas, assegurando o acesso a uma alimenta o nutricionalmente adequada e sustent vel, especialmente aos segmentos mais vulner veis da sociedade.

Palavras-chave: alimentos industrializados, alimento processado, alimentos *in natura*, promo o da sa de alimentar e nutricional, seguran a alimentar.

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