

PROMOTING HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE DIETS IN SOUTH ASIA: A CONSUMER ADVOCACY PERSPECTIVE

Food systems in India and Bangladesh are in desperate need of decisive action to save consumers from the triple crisis of hunger, malnutrition, and environmental breakdown. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought food insecurity back to the top of the agenda in South Asia, but it is vital that government responses to this challenge also address the long-running public health emergency caused by unhealthy diets, and the growing threat posed by climate change to food systems in the region.

This year's United Nations Food Systems Summit represents a unique opportunity for global action to deliver food systems transformation that addresses these diverse challenges in a holistic and cross-cutting way; for cross-border co-operation in the development of food systems solutions; and finally, as a "[people's summit](#)", to elevate neglected voices to become a central part of this crucial conversation.

In light of this opportunity, six consumer organisations from India and Bangladesh, supported by Consumers International, have come together to build a plan of action that centres consumer rights and needs, highlighting how governments can empower and enable consumers to play their part in this transformation. [Consumers have a right to healthy and sustainable food](#), but in India and Bangladesh such options are too often unavailable, unaffordable, or inaccessible – both countries' governments have a responsibility to help overcome these barriers to better diets.

Consumer advocates have a [valuable and essential role](#) to play in driving food systems change, bringing expertise and experience of consumer rights and needs. In this statement, and in the [accompanying policy recommendations report](#), consumer advocates in India and Bangladesh have identified six key areas in which meaningful change is most urgently needed and offered a set of priority actions needed to achieve these goals. We call on both governments to:

1. IMPROVE CONSUMER INFORMATION FOR MORE EMPOWERED CHOICES

The first step towards enabling healthy and sustainable diets is making it easy for consumers to understand what they are buying. Governments should:

- Introduce mandatory front-of-pack 'high in' warning labels, allowing consumers to easily identify and avoid products high in unhealthy nutrients.
- Run national and regional campaigns to educate consumers and other food systems actors on national dietary guidelines and sustainable consumption.

2. REGULATE MARKETING TO PROTECT VULNERABLE CONSUMERS

The promotion of unhealthy food products to vulnerable consumers is an exploitative practice that must be challenged. Restrictions protecting children in particular can create long-term behavioural shifts. Governments should:

- Introduce mandatory restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to all consumers under the age of 18, including all forms of advertising, promotion, and sponsorship, as well as celebrity endorsements.
- Establish implementation and enforcement systems with clear and proportionate sanctions to ensure compliance.

3. SET STANDARDS FOR HEALTHY, SAFE, AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD

Food standards are the foundation of a well-functioning food system. Mandatory requirements ensure that consumers can be confident that their right to healthy, safe, and sustainable food is being met. Governments should:

- Introduce and enforce mandatory restrictions on the use of industrially produced trans fat, and set targets for the reformulation of packaged food high in other unhealthy nutrients such as sugar, salt, and saturated fat.
- Implement safety standards to improve hygiene practices for street food.
- Promote voluntary and advisory certifications for safety and sustainability.

4. INCENTIVISE DIETARY CHANGE THROUGH FISCAL POLICY

Intelligent and innovative taxes and subsidies can incentivise healthy and sustainable food options, while ensuring that food remains accessible and affordable for all consumers. Governments should:

- Introduce taxes on food products which fail to meet nutritional standards, reinvesting the proceeds in measures to support consumers.
- Create subsidies to make healthy and sustainable foods more affordable, both by incentivising responsible agricultural production and by providing financial support to consumers.

5. DELIVER PROGRESS THROUGH PUBLIC PROCUREMENT AND DISTRIBUTION

Governments have a responsibility to lead by example, developing food procurement and distribution systems that promote nutrition and sustainability while providing a safety net for vulnerable consumers. Governments should:

- Introduce unified and coherent national public procurement policies to tackle regional fragmentation and guarantee the provision of safe and healthy food for low-income consumers.
- Introduce mandatory nutritional criteria for publicly procured food, and set targets for the provision of sustainable, seasonal, locally produced food.

6. INVEST IN IMPROVING SUPPLY CHAINS

Investment is needed to support the development of inclusive, sustainable supply chains that serve the needs of both producers and consumers. Governments should:

- Support initiatives that connect producers and consumers directly, reducing environmental impact while enabling fairer, more stable food prices.
- Tackle food loss and waste by investing in transport and storage infrastructure and incentivising the use of recyclable or biodegradable packaging.

For further details on these recommendations, please see the accompanying policy report. We hope that this statement, and the United Nations Food Systems Summit more broadly, can serve as the launchpad not only for a process of food systems transformation in South Asia, but also for a more productive and collaborative relationship between consumers and policymakers in both India and Bangladesh.



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This statement was produced with support from Consumers International, the global membership organisation bringing together over 200 consumer groups across more than 100 countries. The recommendations outlined within this statement reflect the priorities of the signatory organisations, but do not necessarily represent a global position held by all Consumers International members.