

Redesigning school food environments in Brazil: public sector innovation to protect children and adolescents and promote food and nutrition security



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In Latin America, the widespread availability of ultra-processed foods in school environments has emerged as a pressing public health concern. The increasing exposure of children and adolescents to these products jeopardises not only their individual well-being, but also broader regional efforts to address malnutrition, childhood obesity, and food and nutrition insecurity.¹

In Brazil, this scenario has prompted a normative and institutional response of unprecedented scope, aligned with international recommendations such as those from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO),² which recognise schools as strategic settings for fostering healthy and sustainable diets. Although the country boasts one of the largest and most enduring school feeding programmes globally—the National School Feeding Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar*—PNAE), which provides healthy meals to over 40 million students in basic education—the commercialisation of ultra-processed foods within both public and private schools remains a serious concern. Their sale in canteens and snack bars poses a dual threat: it undermines the provision of meals aligned with the *Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population*³ in public schools, while simultaneously reinforcing unhealthy consumption habits through the pervasive presence of soft drinks, crisps, sweets, and similar products.

Brazil's efforts align with broader developments across Latin America. Countries such as Chile,⁴ Mexico,⁵ Uruguay,⁶ and Ecuador⁷ have already implemented policies to reshape school food environments. These experiences offer valuable models for regional action and demonstrate that meaningful transformation is both feasible and already underway throughout the Americas.

In December 2023, the Brazilian government issued Decree No. 11,821,⁸ establishing guidelines for promoting adequate and healthy diets in both public and private schools. The regulation is structured around three pillars: the integration of food and nutrition education into pedagogical practices; the regulation of food sales and donations, prioritising fresh and minimally processed foods; and the control of marketing communications directed at children. By recognising schools as spaces for value formation and social protection, the decree introduces a comprehensive and systemic approach to promoting healthy eating from early childhood.

The agenda for regulating school food environments is led by the National Secretariat for Food and Nutrition Security (SESAN) of the Ministry of Social Development, Family and Fight Against Hunger (MDS), through an innovative governmental approach: direct technical support to states and municipalities to develop and implement their own local regulations. This approach builds on longstanding efforts by civil society organisations advocating for healthy school food environments. Its innovation lies in the institutional commitment of the federal government to foster local advocacy, mobilisation, and technical assistance. Since early 2025, the MDS has mobilised a network of local supporters in 50 cities and 13 federal units. These professionals work within local contexts to identify stakeholders, foster intersectoral coordination, and provide technical and legal support to local administrations. The initiative also seeks to involve school communities, recognising their central role in shaping healthier food environments, as well as civil society organisations committed to advancing local food and nutrition security. It is a decentralised approach that values territorial diversity and invests in institutional capacity-building to shield schools from the influence of ultra-processed foods and child-targeted advertising.

This initiative is part of the broader National Strategy for Food and Nutrition Security in Cities—*Alimenta Cidades* (Feeding Cities), also coordinated by the SESAN/MDS. With a wider scope, the strategy aims to transform urban food environments as a whole,

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promoting access to healthy foods, supporting family farming, and fostering intersectoral action in urban outskirts.⁹ While school environments are one of its components, the local implementation of the decree represents a distinct front, with its own methodology and regulatory focus.

Initial results reinforce the strength of the agenda. Of the 63 localities currently receiving support, 25 have already made concrete progress, including draft bills under development, proposals submitted, regulations approved by municipal and state legislatures, and laws in the process of implementation. According to data from the 2024 Brazilian School Census, these 25 localities account for more than 21 million students who will be protected from exposure to ultra-processed foods in school settings. These figures highlight the transformative potential of the initiative and its capacity to generate large-scale impact.

Despite these advances, the initiative faces substantial challenges. The ultra-processed food and beverage industry has acted in a coordinated manner to obstruct the legislative process, including direct interference aimed at excluding the term “ultra-processed food” from the scope of regulatory restrictions.¹⁰ This interference underscores the persistent tension between public policies objectives and corporate interests in shaping food system governance. Overcoming such pressures requires not only technical expertise, but also political coordination, social mobilisation, and an ethical commitment to food and nutrition security.

Decree No. 11,821 is aligned with Brazil’s international commitments, which underscore the urgency of promoting healthy diets within school settings.⁸ These include the country’s adherence to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (zero hunger and sustainable agriculture), SDG 3 (health and wellbeing), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production); its active participation in the Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025), as the first country to formalise specific commitments; and its engagement in the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS + 2), reaffirming its dedication to transforming food systems towards sustainability and equity.

Brazil’s regulatory experience in school food environments exemplifies institutional innovation, decentralised technical support, and resistance to corporate interference. It illustrates that safeguarding children through public policies that promote healthy diets is both achievable and imperative. Disseminating this approach bolsters regional cooperation and contributes meaningfully to advancing food and nutrition security, equity, and the well-being of future generations across Latin America.

Contributors

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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