

## World Children's Day 2022: power, policy, and children's rights to nutrition



World Children's Day on Nov 20, 2022, marks the adoption of the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. As countries reckon with multiple economic, health, social, and political crises, it is timely to address the rights of all children with respect to food. Governments can do more to protect children's rights to good quality diets, nutrition, and health. Globally, about a third of children younger than 5 years experience some form of malnutrition.<sup>1</sup> Of further concern, healthy diets have become increasingly unaffordable for millions of children and their families or carers, with food insecurity increasing since 2019, particularly in South Asia, Africa, and other low-income and middle-income economies (LMICs).<sup>1</sup>

The political inertia towards policies that create healthy and equitable food systems partly stems from the inequitable distribution of power across food systems decision making.<sup>2</sup> In food systems, frameworks on the commercial determinants of health suggest that power is concentrated towards large transnational corporations, that tend to use this power to promote the consumption of less healthy foods and beverages.<sup>3</sup> Here, we highlight that a shift in power towards children (and those responsible for upholding children's rights) is required to truly achieve healthy and equitable food systems that prioritise children's wellbeing.

Children's power within food systems is insignificant compared with corporate actors. Whether building political power (eg, through lobbying) or market power (eg, through marketing), large transnational corporations relentlessly work towards increasing shareholder returns.<sup>3</sup> Many policy actions can and should be taken to regulate the corporate activities in food systems. One area worthy of focus is restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages, which insidiously shape children's attitudes, values, and behaviours, and create social norms and food environments that promote the consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages.<sup>4</sup> In the era of big data and digital media, targeted marketing influences children's "choices" and undermines their right to good health and to participate online without being exploited for economic gain.<sup>5,6</sup> These practices are concerning globally, including in many LMICs, where marketing by transnational food companies is often extensive, child-directed, and includes

more price promotions and giveaways than in high-income countries.<sup>7-10</sup>

Although governments are taking action to restrict food marketing, no country has gone far enough to protect children from the impact of unhealthy food marketing, partly due to corporate lobbying and influences on policy making.<sup>11,12</sup> Best practice restrictions need to apply to all unhealthy food marketing across all media and settings.<sup>13</sup>

The unbalanced power structures in food systems also reflect wider oppressive systems, including paternalism, colonialism, racism, and neoliberalism. Under such systems, decision makers typically determine what is best for communities and minimise their agency, self-determination, and voices.<sup>14</sup> With few formal mechanisms to disrupt this status quo and prioritise diverse children's voices and rights, children's interests are often under-represented in food systems policies and decisions.

While we are increasingly paying attention to the dominance of transnational corporations in food systems, there is also a need for all actors to examine how we contribute to these systems. Are we still determining what communities need to be healthy and well, without supporting their leadership and self-determination? As government representatives, academics, and community and food systems leaders, our material and discursive power can be shared with young people and their communities to amplify their voices and support them to lead food systems initiatives. For example, in the UK the Bite Back 2030 movement has built platforms for youth activists to drive campaigns for healthier and fairer food systems. This movement shows how children, including those who are experiencing social or economic disadvantage, can push food system changes onto the political agenda. Children are also our next generation of voters and engaging them in food systems issues early can empower them to vote for healthy and equitable food system transformations in the future.

Finally, there must be widespread recognition that efforts to address childhood malnutrition are not complete until women and girls have fair socioeconomic and education opportunities around the world. Women and children's ongoing economic disempowerment restricts their capacity to interact with food systems to

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**Panel: Examples of priority policy actions to equitably empower children in food systems**

- Governments need to create healthier food and nutrition environments for all children, starting by regulating corporate activities that put wealth before children’s health, including ending the economic exploitation of children through the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.
- Governments need to provide children with platforms for their lived experiences with food to be heard and acted upon in food systems policy making.
- Food systems actors (including policy makers, jurists, manufacturing industries, food producers, academics, community organisations, and community members) need to commit to greater inclusion of the perspectives of children from diverse social and economic positions in decision-making processes.
- Governments need to implement social and education policies to enhance the intergenerational empowerment of women and children. These should be viewed as core to supporting women and children’s interactions with food systems for health.

advance their health.<sup>15,16</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic, globally 150 million more women than men are estimated to be affected by food insecurity and an additional 47 million women and girls live in poverty.<sup>17,18</sup> During crises, women and young girls often give up food for their families, work in agricultural sectors to generate profits for male bosses, undertake unpaid caring responsibilities, and can be less likely to return to school.<sup>19</sup>

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that member states as duty bearers have the responsibility to provide material assistance and support programmes to children’s caregivers (who are disproportionately women), particularly in regard to nutrition.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, social protection through food fortification and cash transfer schemes can improve nutrition outcomes for women and children in LMICs.<sup>21</sup> For example, during the early 2000s, women and children were better supported through social protection and education measures implemented by progressive governments in Brazil and Argentina.<sup>22</sup> Yet, in many countries, there are insufficient social and education policies to support better nutrition and wellbeing for all, and in many settings policies are delayed by neoliberal discourse focused on individual responsibility for health and wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

Our shared humanity hinges on the extent to which we uphold children’s rights and empower all children in any system. Governments that do not put children’s health

before corporate power in food systems need to be held to account. In the panel we highlight examples of policies that need to be prioritised to equitably empower children in food systems. Better mechanisms across food system actors (government, academia, community, and industry) will be required to place children’s voices and interests at the forefront of food systems decisions. Such efforts need to focus on children who have experienced the most social or economic marginalisation. Gender-focused social protection and education measures that economically advance girls and women must also be seen as crucial if we are to genuinely address all forms of malnutrition. World Children’s Day 2022 is here to remind us all that, as UNICEF highlights, “Kids everywhere are standing up for a more equal, inclusive world. What will you do?”<sup>24</sup>

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