



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemakingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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SA food industry not taking enough action to address obesity and undernutrition

A new scientific [report](#) by the [Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa](#) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), in collaboration with partners from the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), the University of the Western Cape, and LMU Munich (Germany), has revealed that South Africa's food industry is not taking sufficient action to address obesity and undernutrition and create healthier food environments.

The report, published on 12 February 2026, assessed and benchmarked the voluntary commitments and practices of 29 major food companies (15 food and non-alcoholic beverage manufacturers, four supermarkets and 10 quick-service restaurants) operating in South Africa, examining their efforts to support healthier food environments and improve population nutrition.

Information was collected from publicly available sources (company websites, annual reports, codes of conduct, media releases) and company commitments and practices were assessed across seven domains of the [BIA-Obesity](#) tool developed by the [INFORMAS](#) network. Company representatives were invited to verify and supplement the collected data.

Overall, the findings revealed substantial gaps in reported voluntary industry action. Despite wide performance differences, particularly among assessed food and non-alcoholic beverage manufacturers, average scores were low across the board: 29/100 for food and non-alcoholic beverage manufacturers, 20/100 for supermarkets and 10/100 for quick-service restaurants. While companies reported some action on corporate strategy, nutrition labelling and disclosure of external relationships and lobbying, major shortcomings remain.

Why this report matters

South Africa is facing an increasing double burden of malnutrition, which is characterised by the simultaneous presence of under- and overnutrition. While global progress in reducing undernourishment has stalled since the COVID-19 pandemic, rates in South Africa continue to rise. Around seven million people experience chronic hunger, 27% of children under five are stunted, and 31% of women aged 15 years and older are anaemic.

At the same time, more than 21 million South Africans are overweight or obese, resulting in a high risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases.

Associate Professor Peter Delobelle, principal study investigator and chief research officer at UCT's Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa, explained: "The rising burden of obesity, diabetes and hypertension compels us to look to the wider environment, since a major driver of the growing double burden of malnutrition are unhealthy food environments, which are dominated by the widespread availability and marketing of unhealthy foods."

Zandile Mchiza, principal study investigator and a chief specialist scientist at SAMRC's Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit and extraordinary professor at UWC's School of Public Health, said: "While some companies have taken steps to improve food environments, overall performance remains low, particularly with regard to protecting children from unhealthy food marketing, improving access to healthy foods, reducing nutrients of concern in products, and taking meaningful action to address undernutrition. Quick-service restaurants performed notably worse than the other sectors."

The need to take action

Food and beverage manufacturers, supermarkets and quick-service restaurants play a central role in shaping food environments and dietary patterns. While these actors have great potential to positively influence population nutrition, they also contribute to under- and overnutrition. Evidence across a range of countries, however, indicates that industry self-regulation is often ineffective.

The report recommended that companies carefully review these results and prioritise suggested actions. In addition, stronger public policies are needed to establish a level playing field and ensure progress in areas where voluntary industry commitments remain weak, inconsistent or poorly implemented.

Carmen Klinger, lead study investigator and research associate at LMU Munich, shared: "Our findings show that voluntary action taken by many food companies is falling short of what is needed to create healthier food environments and address the double burden of malnutrition in South Africa."

The report was part of FoodSAMSA, a four-year collaborative project (2022-2025) aimed at addressing the high burden of under- and overnutrition in South Africa. FoodSAMSA was supported by funds from Germany's Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za