

ANALYSING EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF BOUILLON SEASONINGS IN SENEGAL AND THE TENSION BETWEEN PUBLIC HEALTH AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Sodium-rich bouillon is a widely used ingredient in West African diets

Over the past two decades, the prevalence of diet-related non-communicable diseases (DR-NCDs) such as diabetes and hypertension has risen sharply in Sub-Saharan Africa. Increasing prevalence of DR-NCDs on the continent has been linked to unhealthy food habits, including consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) (Popkin et al., 2012¹; Reardon et al., 2021²).

This policy brief is part of a broader research study on Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM) in nutrition. Building on two previous deliverables—one on the concept of EIDM (https://www.nutrition-research-facility.eu/IMG/pdf/nrf_policy_brief_eidm_en.pdf) and another analysing a sample of national nutrition policies (https://www.nutrition-research-facility.eu/IMG/pdf/nrf_policy_brief_evidence_needs_africa_en.pdf), this case study delves deeper into how scientific evidence informs policy processes.

In Senegal, nearly one in three adults have raised blood pressure. As in much of West Africa, bouillon seasonings are widely consumed due to their affordability, convenience, and ability to enhance flavour in traditional dishes. However, these products typically contain high levels of sodium, which poses public health concerns. Excessive consumption contributes to hypertension and other DR-NCDs, creating tension between dietary practices and population health objectives. In the absence of strong national or regional policies targeting DR-NCDs, aggressive marketing strategies shape consumption patterns, while bouillon production contributes to local economies by generating employment and tax revenues. The unregulated consumption underscores the need for robust evidence-informed food governance. As part of the Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project, funded by the European Union, the Nutrition Research Facility has investigated Senegal's policy-making processes regarding bouillon seasonings.

Figure 1. Five key themes around bouillon regulations in Senegal

<p>1. Competing narratives in the public debate</p>	<p>The public debate is polarised with growing divide: manufacturers assert bouillons' cultural importance and safety, while nutritionists, other health professionals and civil society organisations point to potential health risks, rising healthcare costs and threats to traditional culinary practices.</p>
<p>2. Fragmented institutional governance of industrial foods</p>	<p>Several ministries are involved in the regulations of bouillons, often operating in silos. While the Ministries of Finance or Industry or Trade, have a prominent role, working closely with the agri-food industry (AFIs), the Ministry of Health, tend to play a marginal role and has a greater focus on undernutrition compared to DR-NCDs, leading to policy incoherence and undermining efforts to prioritise health in food regulation targeting UPFs.</p>
<p>3. Food Industry influence and resistance to regulation</p>	<p>The bouillon industry wields lobbying power through groups like COTEC (Technical Committee of Industrials), to deploying a range of combined influence strategies (economic arguments, legal action, public communication and instrumentalisation of scientific knowledge). Their success in reducing a proposed 25% health tax to 15% and removing health-based claims from the the associated policy document illustrates how commercial interests can override public health imperatives. Nevertheless, state fiscal needs can constrain industry influence, reflecting the limits of bouillon AFIs' reach in Senegal.</p>
<p>4. Polarisation over fortification issue</p>	<p>Some NGOs and funders advocate for mandatory multi-fortified bouillons as a practical solution to address micronutrient deficiencies, while supporting economic growth. In contrast, consumer associations and nutrition researchers question the health benefits of these products due to the high sodium-density, as well as the commercial implications of mandatory fortification and risks on increased consumption levels. These divergent positions reflect underlying power asymmetries and highlight the difficulty of developing inclusive and transparent decision-making processes.</p>
<p>5. Limited independent scientific research</p>	<p>Local research capacity experiences financial and technical constraints, and Senegal's development actors, such as NGOs often rely on laboratories outside of Senegal for analysis of key data, such as nation-wide sodium intake studies. Research is typically carried out or financed by international NGOs, with uneven data sharing. This reliance constrains "scientific sovereignty" and complicates evidence-informed policy-making.</p>

¹Popkin, B.M., Adair, L.S., Ng, S.W., 2012. Global nutrition transition and the pandemic of obesity in developing countries. *Nutrition Reviews* 70, 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-4887.2011.00456.x>

³ Food Systems Dashboard. <https://www.foodsystemsdashboard.org/countries/sen#adult-raised-blood-pressure> (accessed April 2025); NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC). *Adult Raised Blood Pressure* – Senegal

²Reardon, T., Tschirley, D., Liverpool-Tasie, L. S. O., Awokuse, T., Fanzo, J., Minten, B., Vos, R., Dolislager, M., Sauer, C., Dhar, R., Vargas, C., Lartey, A., Raza, A., & Popkin, B. M. (2021). The processed food revolution in African food systems and the double burden of malnutrition. *Global Food Security*, 28, 100466. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2020.100466>

Regulating bouillon: dealing with controversies and divergent interests between health and economy

Bouillons are the subject of a highly controversial public debate and their regulations involve multiple stakeholders including government bodies (e.g., the Ministries of Industry, Trade, and Finance), bouillon manufacturers, nutrition researchers, and civil society with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and consumer associations. Based on the analysis of on-line media press, extensive interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and key policy documents, five key themes shaping the public debate and the formulation process of regulations were identified (Figure 1). The themes were identified following a classification of the data through the software Nvivo.

Policy Recommendations: Towards health-driven regulation

Addressing the public health challenges posed by UPFs, such as bouillon consumption in Senegal, requires a health-framing of public action, a multi-stakeholder approach and better use of scientific evidence in decision-making processes. The recommendations below outline actionable measures to refocus on public health priorities and safeguard consumer wellbeing.



1. **Enhance the role of health ministries in regulation:** Recognise the critical role of health ministries and services addressing nutrition and DR-NCDs in regulating food environments and UPFs, like bouillons.
2. **Strengthen robust and coherent regulations:** Advocate for strict regulatory frameworks governing AFIs producing UPFs, particularly concerning sodium content. Ensure nutritional standards are not subordinated to AFIs' economic goals by implementing conflict-of-interest management frameworks.
3. **Promote transparency and stakeholder consultation:** Ensure transparency and inclusive consultation of nutrition stakeholders in political decision-making processes involving health and nutrition issues. Consumer associations and researchers are key actors in fostering and expanding public debate on health and nutrition issues in public policy, including those managed by ministries other than health.
4. **Support local research and scientific sovereignty:** Assert the importance of scientific sovereignty for Global South countries in contexts with diverse development actors, donors, and international researchers. North-South scientific partnerships must be balanced to foster such sovereignty. This could also encompass building in-country capacity to conduct nutritional surveillance.
5. **Encourage local innovation and alternatives:** Considering the increasing global emphasis on food sovereignty, support initiatives leveraging local food resources to combat malnutrition. Development partners can play a crucial role by assisting local small and medium enterprises in producing alternatives to UPFs like industrial bouillons from multinational corporations, while avoiding nutri-washing of mass-produced UPFs.
6. **Promote large-scale awareness campaigns:** Launch extensive awareness campaigns on the risks of NCDs linked to excessive sodium consumption, explicitly targeting high-sodium foods like industrial bouillons. These campaigns should encourage more balanced and diverse dietary practices.

For more information:

<https://www.nutrition-research-facility-studies.eu/Major-barriers-to-nutrition-related-EIDM>