



Food processing: unknown, and therefore unloved?

How to bring some nuance to an emotional debate

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Fevia

Today's presentation

- 1 Food processing: what is it, why is it needed?
- 2 From processing to “ultra-processed”
- 3 NOVA & the health evidence
- 4 Is UPF the right lens? Consumers, experts, policy and industry
- 5 How to bring nuance

1

Food processing: what is it, why is it needed?

Food processing is as old as mankind



Prehistory



Antiquity



Industrial era



Modern era



Processing began as survival: making food safer, easier to digest, storable and tradable.

Today, we need food processing more than ever

Food safety



Controls pathogens at scale
Pasteurisation, thermal processing,
freezing, HPP

Food security



Makes supply stable year-round
Longer shelf life; less dependence on
seasonality

Less waste



Preserves surplus and extends shelf life
life
Soups, sauces, frozen mixes, canned foods

Nutrition



Enables fortification and reformulation
reformulation
Iodised salt, folic acid, vitamin D, less
salt/sugar

Access



Makes food affordable and inclusive
Medical nutrition, allergen-free, plant-
based foods

Sustainability



Supports efficient logistics and side-stream
use
Longer shelf life, valorisation, lower waste

The Belgian food industry: an essential sector in a challenging environment



Food processing underpins Belgium's largest industrial sector — while companies face a very challenging economic environment.

Source: Fevia key figures 2025 (vs 2024)

2

**From food processing to
“ultra-processed food”**

There's an elephant in the room

As soon as we talk about food processing, the debate turns to ultra-processed food.

Menu

De Standaard

“Het is te simpel om te zeggen dat ultrabewerkt voedsel verslavend is”

Nieuwsblad

Ultrabewerkt voedsel is slecht voor je en verhoogt je risico op kanker, klopt dat?

Al jaren zit ultrabewerkte voedsel in het verdomhoekje. Voeding waarbij complexe industriële processen aan de pas zijn gekomen, zou bijdragen tot allerlei gezondheidsrisico's, waaronder ook kanker. Klopt dat ook?

La Libre

LE SOIR

Pourquoi ? Opinions Podcasts Politique Société Monde Économie

ACCUEIL • LÉNA

Les aliments ultratransformés seraient aussi addictifs que les cigarettes

Une étude révèle que la nourriture industrielle crée une dépendance comparable à celle de la nicotine. Les scientifiques demandent davantage de réglementations. Avec LÉNA, découvrez le meilleur du journalisme européen.

**ts internationaux alertent quant à
ace majeure pour la santé publique: "Il
urgemment"**

ultra-transformés constituent une menace majeure
publique et nécessitent une action urgente, selon une
d'articles publiés dans la revue médicale "The Lancet"
s internationaux.

300+

written-press articles in
in 2025 (Belga analysis)
analysis)

>80%

of Fevia-tracked
coverage negative

71.2%

negative press coverage
coverage (UG, bachelor
bachelor proof)

81%

negative influencer
posts

Not a day goes by without UPF in the debate — and the tone is overwhelmingly negative.

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Knowledge and opinion of Belgian consumers: UPF has become a top health concern — even when understanding is limited

27%

had heard “a great deal” or “some” about UPF

46%

had heard either “nothing at all” or “just the name”

68%

hold a negative opinion of UPF

65%

of people who have heard “nothing at all” are still concerned

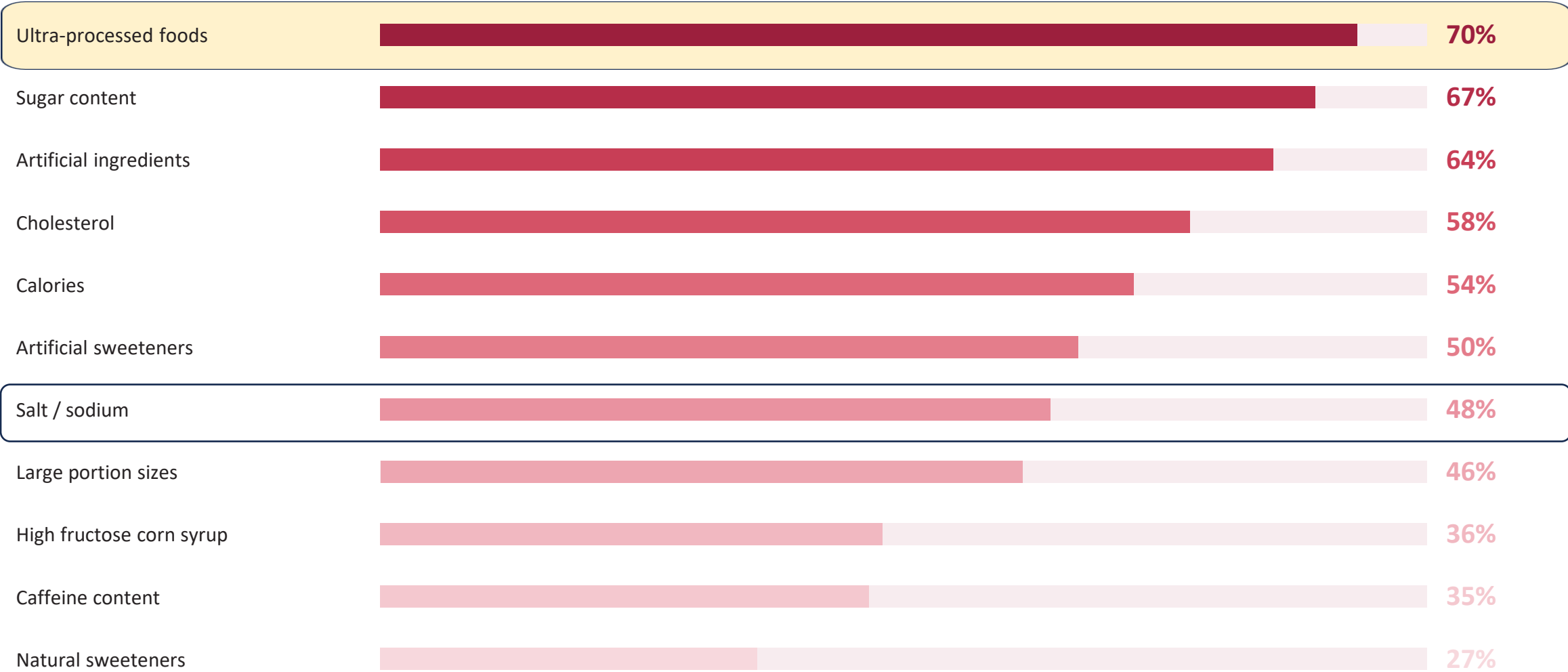
Low understanding does not prevent strong concern.

That does not mean the concern is irrational: when people explain why they worry, they come back to back to health — obesity, diabetes and diet-related disease.

Source: BRC Survey on UPF views in Belgium, October 2024, n=1,001.

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When asked about food and drink, UPF is the number-one concern



Source: BRC Survey on UPF views in Belgium, October 2024, n=1,001.

The societal challenge behind the debate is very real

49%

of Belgians aged 3+ are
overweight

18%

have obesity



35%

are in the very-high-risk waist-
waist-circumference category
category

10%

estimated diabetes prevalence
prevalence (7.6% diagnosed)
diagnosed)

Dietary risks rank among Belgium's top four risk factors in burden of disease (DALYs).

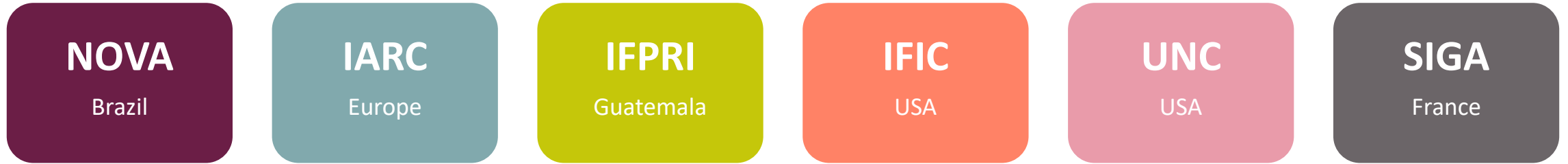
But is “processing level” is the right lens to look at the issue?

Sources: Sciensano Food Consumption Survey 2022–2023; Sciensano Health Interview Survey 2023; Sciensano diabetes estimates (2023); IHME Global Burden of Disease, Belgium 2019.

3.1

What exactly are UPFs — and what does NOVA measure?

Several systems classify food by processing — NOVA seems to become the reference



The UPF concept — mainly through NOVA — has become increasingly popular and is used in observational studies, nutritional guidelines and recommendations.

NOVA's intuitive appeal comes from its simplicity and its “less industrial / more natural” framing.

NOVA classification: four groups



Source: Monteiro et al. (2017), Public Health Nutrition 21(1), pp. 5–17;

The NOVA definition goes beyond the food itself

“Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) ... are branded, commercial formulations made from cheap ingredients ingredients extracted or derived from whole foods, combined with additives, and mostly containing little to no containing little to no whole food. UPFs are designed to compete with the other three Nova groups and groups and maximise industry profits.”

Monteiro et al. (2025), The Lancet 406 (10520)

Producer intent

“designed to compete”, “maximise profits”
profits”

No quantifiable thresholds

“cheap”, “little to no”, “mostly”

Qualitative and vague criteria

“additives”, “whole foods”: undefined.

The issue starts with the wording of the definition – where does science end and ideology begin?

Source: Monteiro CA et al. (2025), “Ultra-processed foods and human health: the main thesis and the evidence”, The Lancet 406(10520), pp. 2667–2684.

As a food categorisation system, NOVA has practical flaws

1 A very broad brush

Wholegrain bread, gummi bears, plant-based burgers, soft drinks, fruit yoghurt, fortified cereals... can all land in Group 4.

One category, hugely different products.

2 Ambiguous definitions undermining reproducibility

The line between Groups 3 and 4 is unclear. Terminology is not operationally precise.

Applying NOVA consistently becomes difficult.

3 Conflict with nutritional realities

Processing degree does not, by itself, tell us nutritional value.

Products with excellent nutritional profile can be UPF, while non-UPF can have poor nutritional value

Sources: Monteiro CA et al. (2017), Public Health Nutrition 21(1), pp. 5–17; Braesco et al. (2022), European Journal of Clinical Nutrition; FoodDrinkEurope, Scientific Critique of UPF Classification (2025).

An example: what is NOVA actually measuring?

Processing ≠ nutrition. NOVA classifies based on how a food is made — regardless of nutritional quality.

Fresh croissant



NOT ultra-processed ✓

High in saturated fat & calories ⚠

Supermarket wholegrain loaf



Classed as ULTRA-processed ⚠

Rich in fibre & essential nutrients ✓

“More processed” does not necessarily mean “less healthy”.

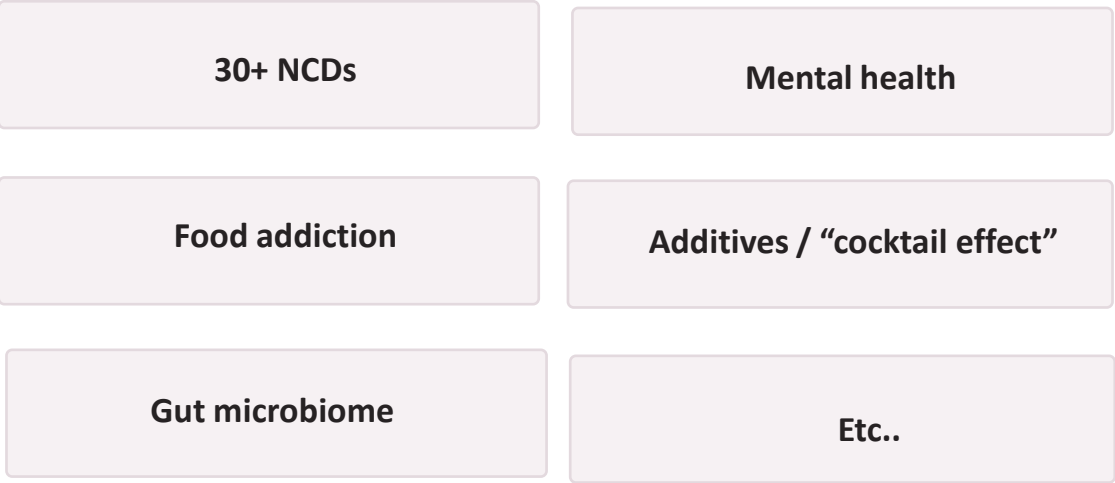
Sources: Monteiro CA et al. (2017), Public Health Nutrition 21(1), pp. 5–17; FoodDrinkEurope, Scientific Critique of UPF Classification (2025).

3.2

What does the health evidence actually tell us?

And what about the health impact?

There are many allegations...



... but the evidence is not all of the same quality



**The vast majority of health evidence on UPF is observational.
Stronger experimental evidence is limited.**

Sources: Magkos et al. (2026), “Ultraprocessed foods and obesity: Interpreting the evidence”, Science, doi:10.1126/science.aef3495.

A closer look at the RCTs: for now, the science is not settled

A 2026 Science article reviews the five published RCTs and finds that the observed effects are better explained by specific nutritional and physical properties of the food than by ultra-processing itself.

1

TEXTURE & EATING SPEED

Soft textures accelerate eating rate — independently of processing.

2

CALORIE DENSITY

UPF trial arms were 0.33–1.0 kcal/g higher in energy density.

3

FIBRE DILUTION

Fixed-calorie comparisons used very different fibre levels.

4

SODIUM & FLUID

Higher sodium can change body weight through fluid retention.

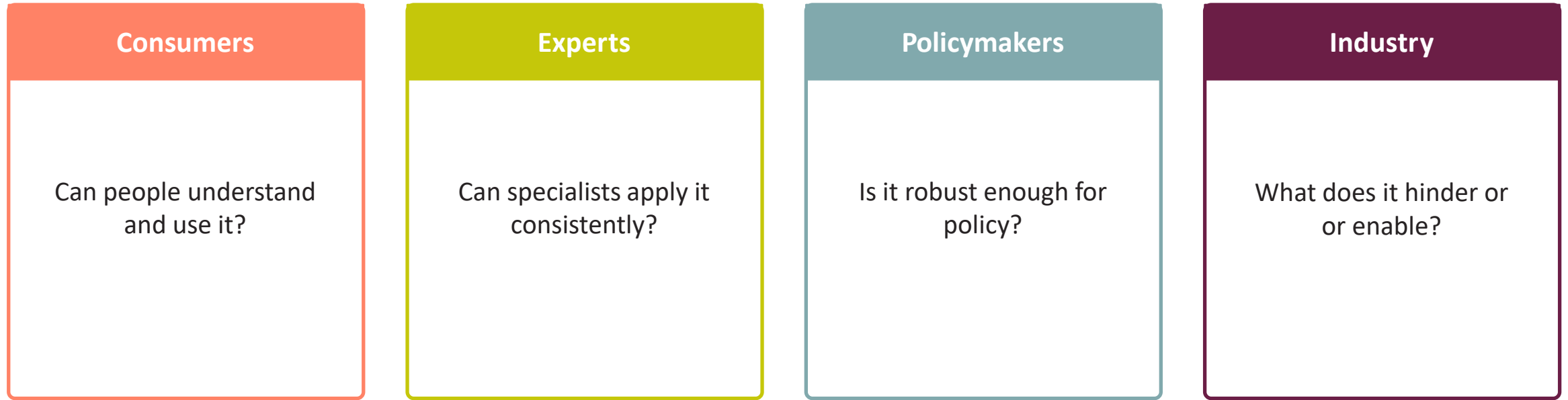
POLICY GUIDANCE • Distinguish nutritionally poor, calorie-dense and rapidly consumed foods, regardless of their degree of processing.

Source: “Ultraprocessed foods and obesity: Interpreting the evidence”, Science (2026)

4

Is UPF the right lens for health and nutrition?

The proof of the pudding is in the eating



For consumers: a simple label can still be a confusing guide

Consumers

Low clarity

More than half say they do not really know what UPF is.

Mixed messages

Media and influencers don't bring don't bring clarity.

Nutritional conflict

Group 4 often doesn't coincide with other nutritional guidance.

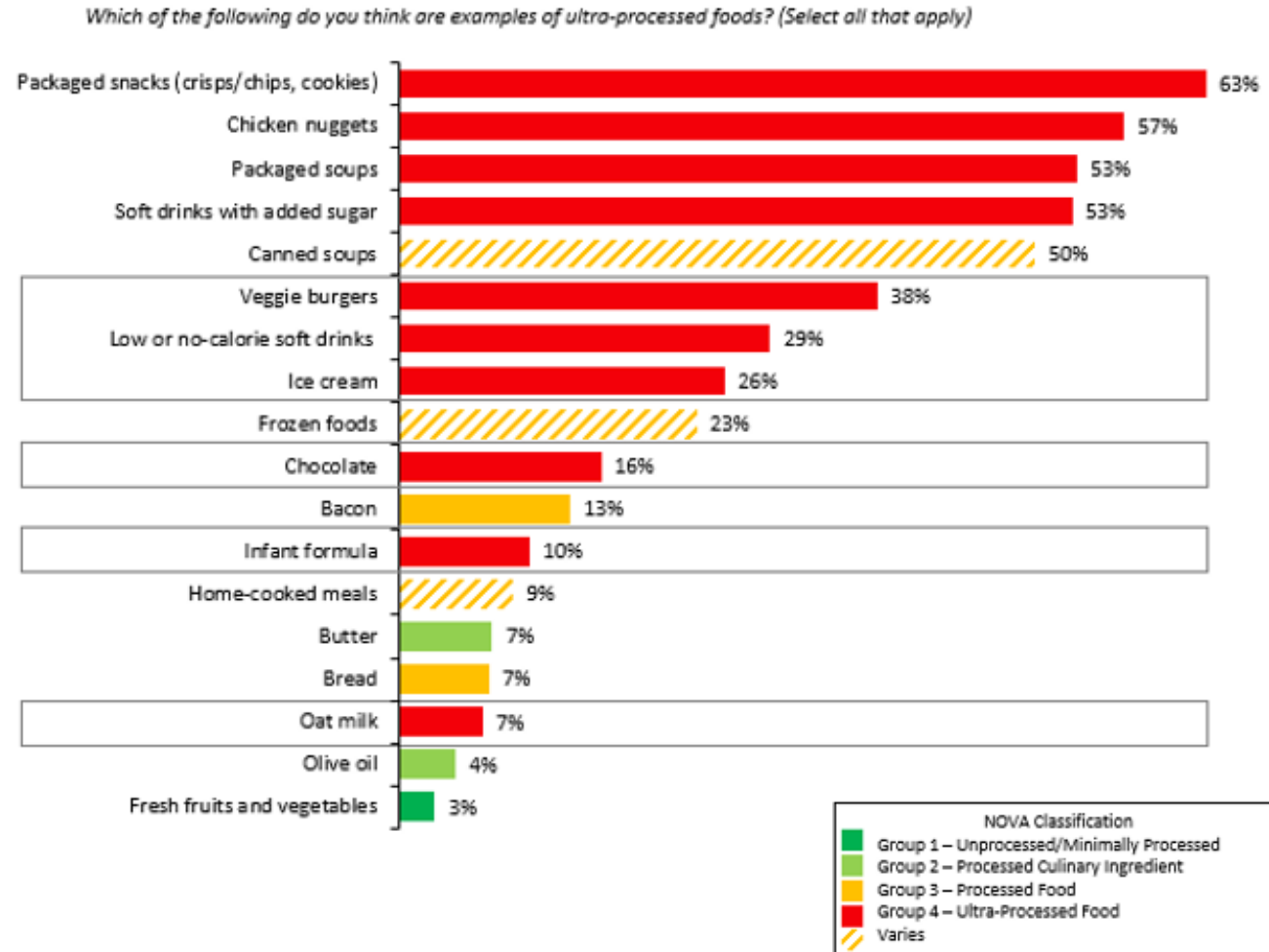
High concern

68% have a negative opinion; 70% are concerned about UPF.

Experts

Policymakers

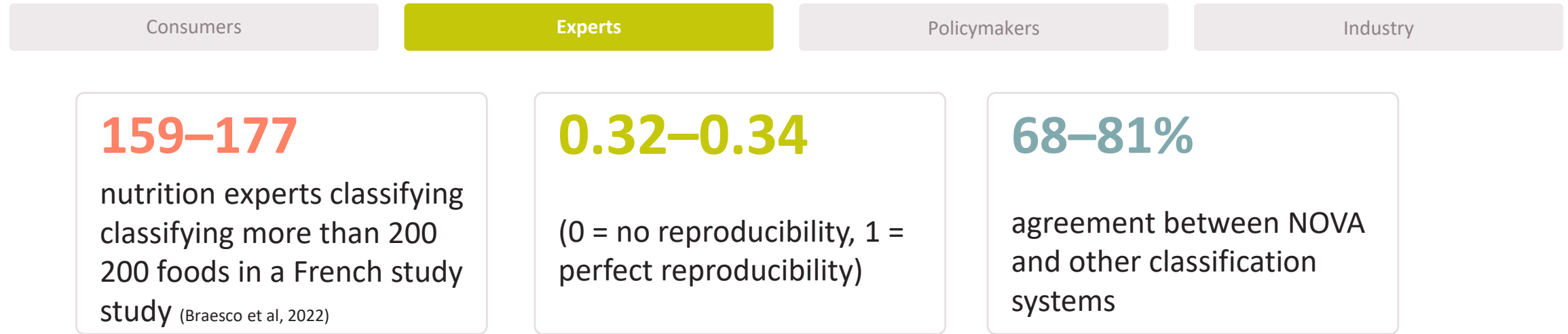
Industry



Sources: Source: BRC Survey on UPF views in Belgium, October 2024, n=1,001.

EIT Food Consumer Observatory (2024); FoodDrinkEurope, Scientific Critique of UPF Classification, p.6 (citing Ares et al., 2016; Sadler et al., 2021/2022; Braesco et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2024).

For experts: even specialists struggle to apply NOVA consistently



By contrast, agreement among the non-NOVA classification systems was 89–99%.
99%.

The hardest products to classify included breads, plant-based alternatives, fortified cereals, flavoured dairy and mixed dishes.

Sources: Braesco et al. (2022), European Journal of Clinical Nutrition; Vlaams Instituut Gezond Leven (2025), comparison of food-processing classification systems.

For policymakers: European context

Consumers

Experts

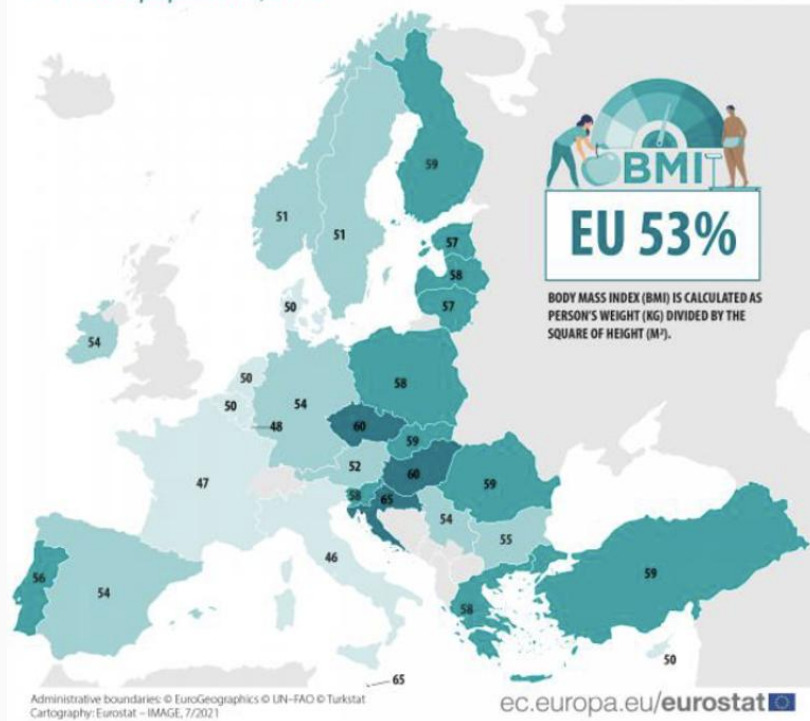
Policymakers

Industry

Overweight population (BMI ≥ 25)

Overweight population (BMI ≥ 25)

% of adult population, 2019



UPF intake (% energy)



Source: Overweight: Eurostat 2019; UPF intake: Mertens et al. 2022.

Food safety and policy advisory agencies tread with care, mostly...

Consumers

Experts

Policy makers

Industry

Independent bodies across Europe recommend pausing — not rushing — on regulating by NOVA. The HGR goes a step further.

UK

SACN

Urges caution in interpreting UPF evidence and its use for public health policy.

2023

FRANCE

ANSES

Calls for further substantiation before using NOVA for national dietary strategy.

2024

NORDICS

NNR

Sees insufficient value in NOVA vs existing classifications and notes nutritional inconsistencies.

2023

BELGIUM

Superior Health Council (HGR/CSS)

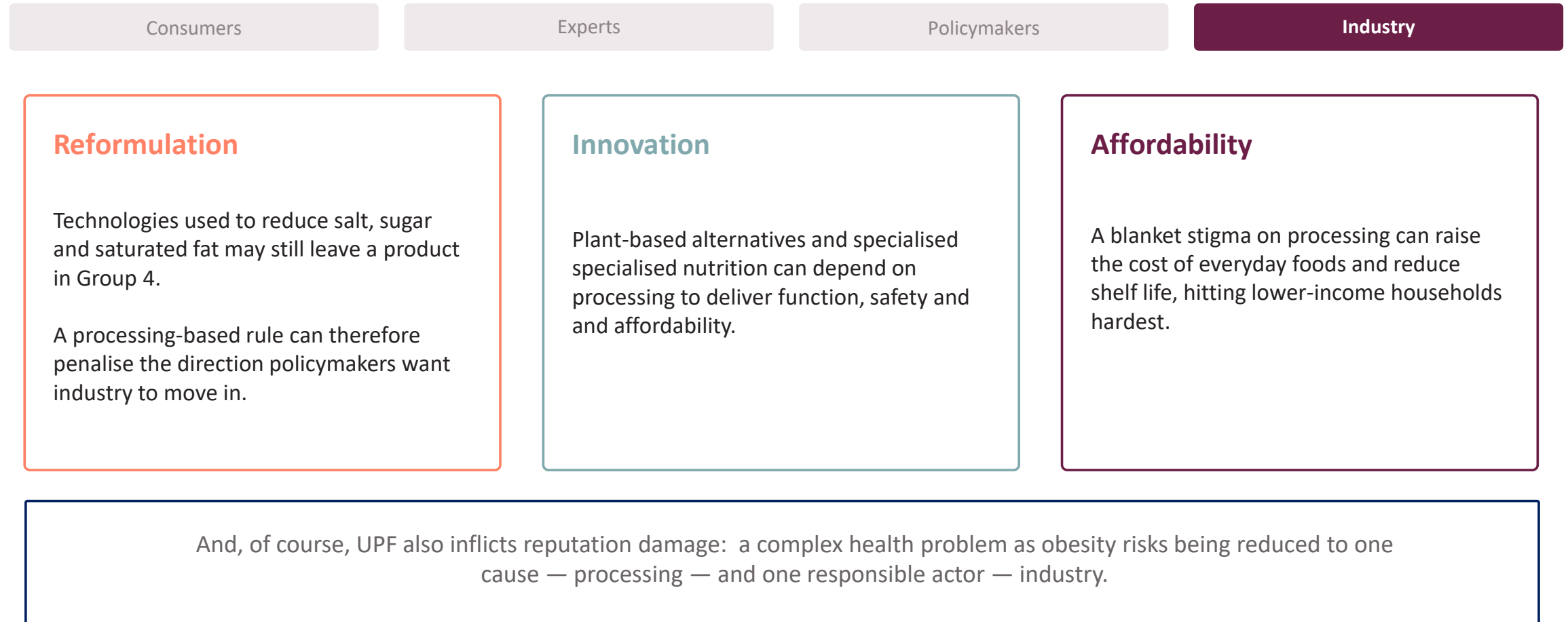
Updated dietary guidelines recommend limiting UPFs in favour of minimally processed foods.

2025

Sources: SACN (UK, 2023); ANSES (France, 2024); Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2023; Superior Health Council / HGR-CSS (Belgium), updated dietary guidelines, June 2025.

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For industry: a processing-based lens has unintended consequences



5

How do we bring nuance into the debate?
debate?

The intuitive appeal of NOVA is understandable — and worth taking seriously



It feels simple

One memorable label for a complex complex food system.



It taps real concern

Diet-related disease is real. People want want an explanation and a tangible target.

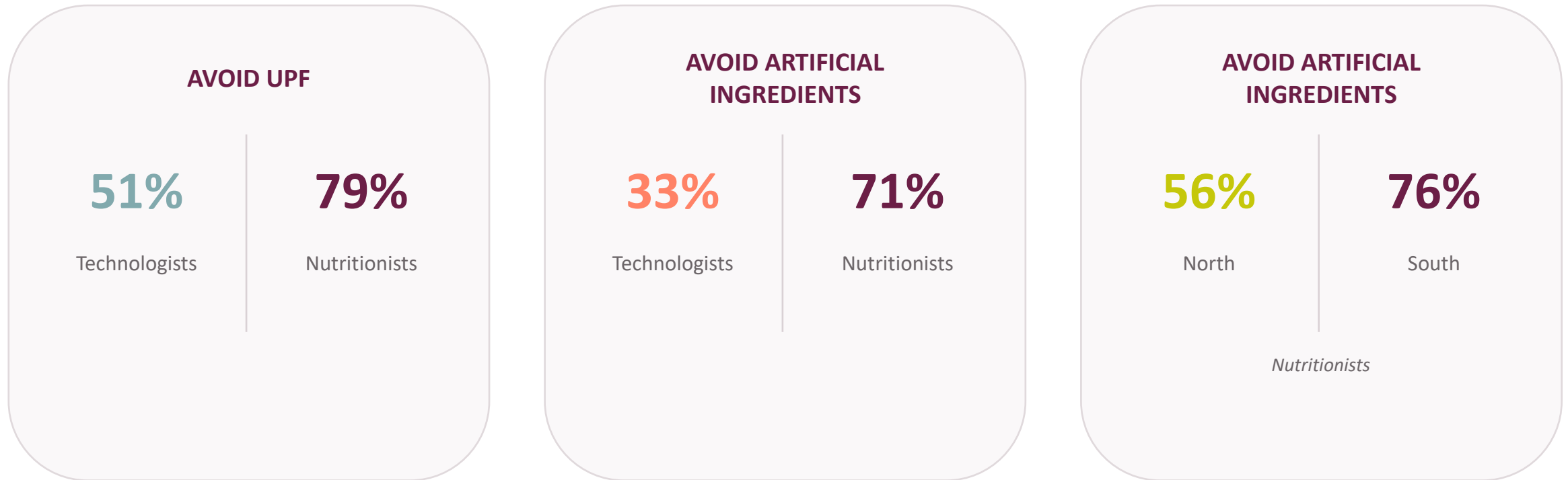


It sounds natural

“Less industrial, more natural” is a a powerful instinct and concern about about additives resonates widely.

The appeal is understandable. But there is a need for a more credible, evidence-based conversation.

Profession and region shape the verdict — even among experts



CORE POINT • What feels “natural” or “artificial” varies by professional background and region — even among experts.

Source: Fevia / FIA Artificial Natural Survey 2026. See notes for sample and caveats.

What can Fevia do? Three pillars to bring nuance to the debate.

3

Plead for an evidence-based health-in-all-policies approach

This also implies scrutinizing UPF as a classification system and a policy tool:

- Robustness and consistency
- Science base and causal evidence
- Consumer usefulness vs confusion
- Suitability for policy and innovation

2

Inform and sensitise on food processing

Together with experts, we share transparent and fact-base information about the industry and its role in food processing

- Basics of food processing
- Benefits for health & environment
- Popular myth-busting
- Role of additives & safety

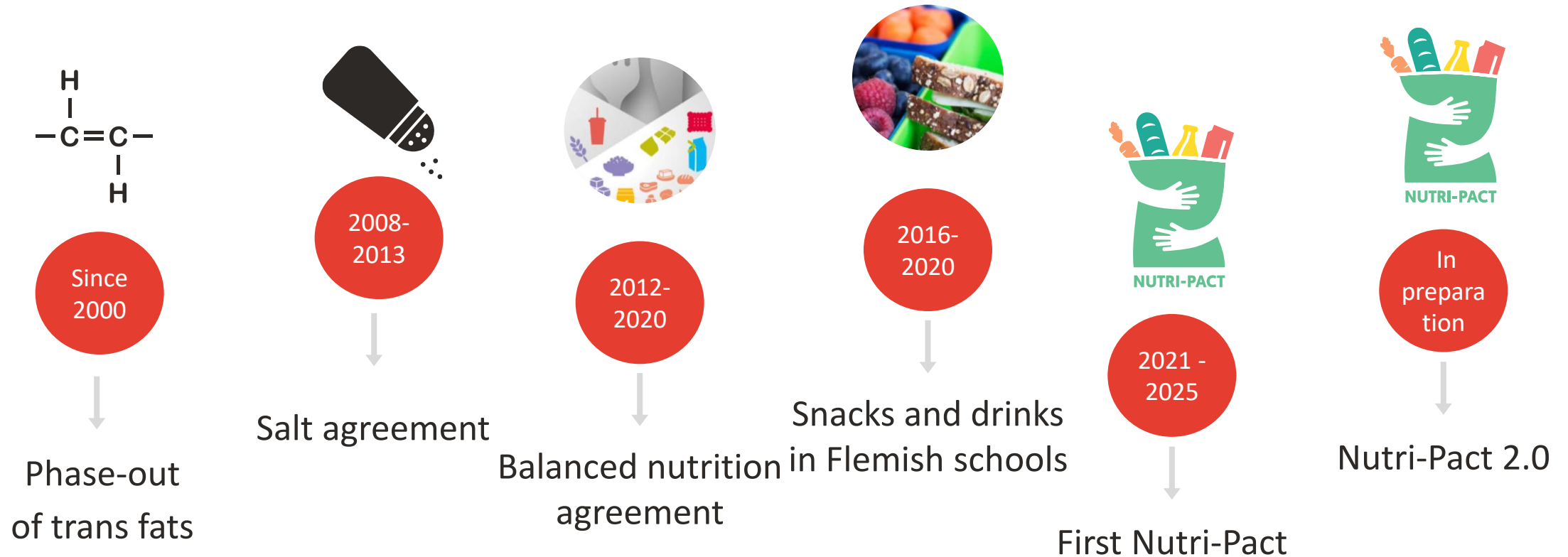
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Enable balanced choices

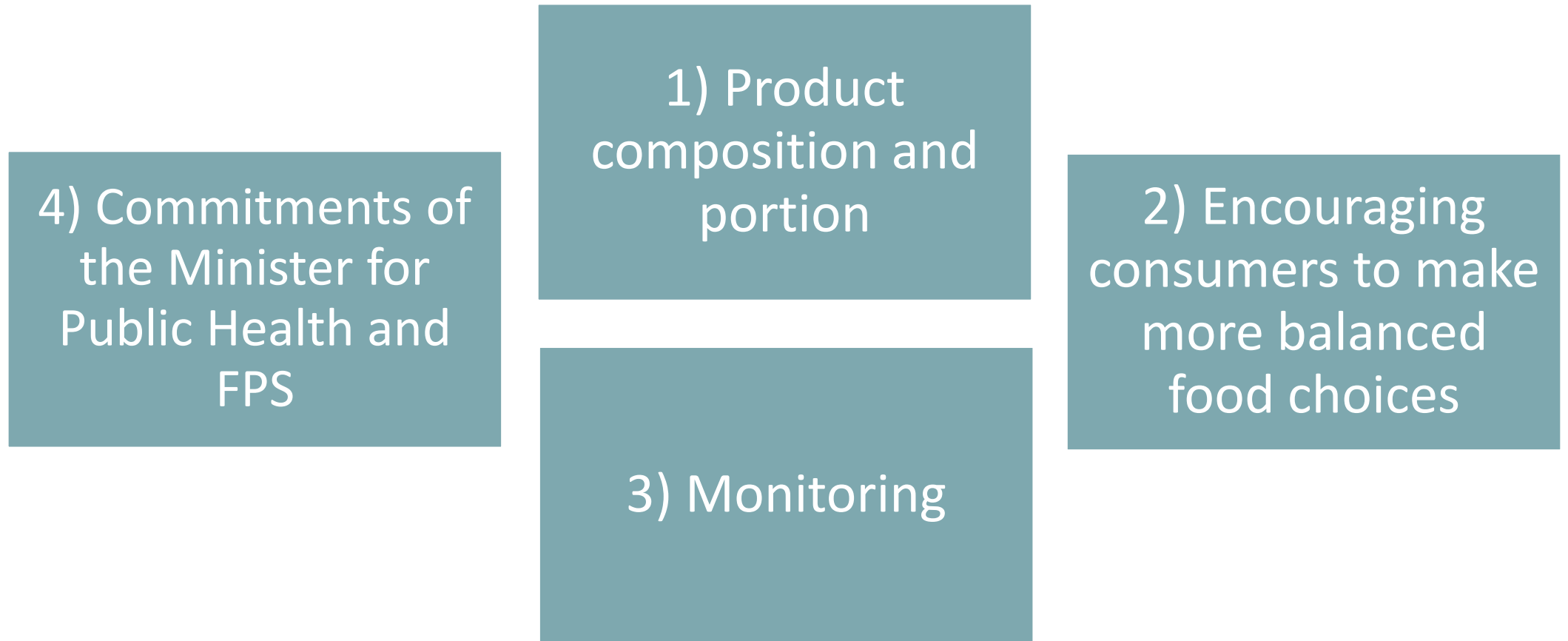
With Nutri-Pact 2.0, we make a new and tangible contribution to help tackle today's health and nutrition challenges

- Renewed focus on dietary-guideline priorities
- HFSS reduction & moderation
- Guiding towards balanced choices
- Responsible marketing

Nutri-Pact 2.0: a new step in a long tradition of making healthier choices easier



The new Nutri-Pact 2.0 is being built on 4 pillars



To conclude...
Processing feeds the world.
Nutrients determine health.
Evidence must guide policy.

The fact is: Processing-based systems like NOVA are just not robust enough as a model. Not to inform consumers, let alone drive policy. The food industry is not an adversary, but a crucial ally – provided measures are founded on strong, proven nutrient-based science.

**Processing is part of our history
history**

Every culture in history has processed food for safety, nutrition, and sustenance.

**NOVA is scientifically flawed
flawed**

Inconsistent classification. Contested among leading nutrition scientists. Mechanisms point to nutrients and energy density, not to processing itself.

Nutrient-focused solutions work

Reformulation has already reduced salt and sugar at scale. Let us do more, together.