São Paulo, 26 February 2025

Open Letter to Professor Susanne Bügel Regarding the Novo Nordisk Project to Create a New Generation of the Nova Food Classification System

c/c BMJ Editor in chief Kamran Abasi; Novo Nordisk Foundation Vice-President Arne Astrup

Dear Professor Bügel,

I am the leader of the group of professors and researchers at the School of Public Health, University of São Paulo who developed the Nova food classification system and the concept of ultra-processed foods. This letter has been written in consultation with them.

I am addressing it to you as the lead researcher of the project funded by the Novo Nordisk Foundation, and organizer of a two-day workshop on June 16-17, 2025, apparently to be moderated by *BMJ,* which states the aim to create a so-called new generation of the Nova classification. I have copied it to Arne Astrup as a vice-president of the Foundation and to the Editor in Chief of *The British Medical Journal*.

As you certainly know, our group at the University of Sao Paulo has described the Nova classification and the ultra-processed concept in articles published in leading scientific journals such as *The Lancet*, *Public Health Nutrition*, *Nature Food*, *Journal of Nutrition*, *Food Policy*, and *Journal of the American Heart Association*.

Our group has also applied Nova in numerous epidemiological studies on ultra-processed food consumption and chronic disease risk, published in internationally renowned scientific journals including *BMJ, JAMA Internal Medicine, PLOS Medicine, Preventive Medicine, American Journal of Preventive Medicine, American Journal of Gastroenterology, Journal of Affective Disorders, Addiction, AJCN, Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Clinical Nutrition, British Journal of Nutrition, European Journal of Nutrition, European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Obesity Reviews, Lancet Regional Health-Europe, Lancet Planetary Health, BMJ Global Health, Global Public Health, International Journal of Public Health, and European Journal of Public Health*.

Many of these articles were published in collaboration with researchers from some of the world's leading universities, including Paris Sorbonne, Imperial College, and Harvard. Additionally, dozens of other academic groups from universities and research centers across all world regions have applied Nova in a wide range of studies. As a result, more than 500 peer-reviewed papers using Nova have been published in the last five years.

The idea for the Novo Nordisk-funded project was initially promoted by Arne Astrup in an article published in a special issue of *AJCN* in 2022, which focused on the usefulness of the Nova classification and the concept of ultra-processed food (UPF). In this article, Astrup stated:

"In view of the foregoing concerns, no more research resources should be spent using the current Nova definition of UPF. Future research to create a novel classification system 'Nova 2.0' should follow evidence-based principles."

In another article in the same journal issue and in the debate consensus, I argued that Astrup's negative view of the Nova classification stemmed partly from his evident lack of knowledge about the classification and the evidence generated using it, partly from his reliance on references from authors who are or have been employees of, consultants to, or funded by corporations that produce or market ultra-processed foods, and partly from his limited and mistaken understanding of causality in the context of diet and chronic disease risk.

On October 24, 2024, I learned from a post on your university's website that the Novo Nordisk Foundation had officially funded the project. The post stated:

"...the Novo Nordisk Foundation has supported a 2-year project, led by Professor Susanne Bügel, Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports, University of Copenhagen, with the aim of developing the next generation of the NOVA classification."

In the same post, you expressed your intention to include researchers from our center at USP—the creators of the Nova classification—in the project:

"An important aim of this project is to bring experts together and include both those who invented the original NOVA classification and those who have been critical."

On October 28, 2024, a food industry media outlet reported on the Novo Nordisk Foundation's announcement with the headline: *"NOVA REFORM: THE FLAWED UPF CLASSIFICATION REQUIRES CHANGE"*

In December 2024, I received a message from Arne Astrup informing me about the project's funding and inviting me to join. I declined the invitation and reiterated my reasons, as stated in my *AJCN* article. Additionally, I expressed my concerns about the project's use of the term *Nova*:

"The NNF seems to be proposing that its project be named Nova 2. This is wrong, and we formally ask that its name be changed and does not indicate, imply or suggest any connection with Nova, which is established as it is. If the name was not changed this would cause chaos. In that event we would have to write to all the organisations, groups and colleagues throughout the world that have endorsed, developed and/or worked with Nova stating that Nova has never had, does not have and will not have any association with NNF - and surely this would discredit NNF which surely would have to state likewise in all communications. Please let me know who at NNF I should write to."

Since I did not receive information on whom I should contact at the Foundation, I decided to wait.

On February 5, 2025, another announcement on the Novo Nordisk Foundation's website again described the project under your leadership as aiming to create a new version of the 'so-called' Nova classification:

"Right now, many are focusing on ultra-processed foods – those that you cannot make in your own kitchen, but are factory-made by adding, for example, modified starch, flavourings and colours, emulsifiers and various E-numbers," says Arne Astrup. "However, we are at risk of demonising healthy foods such as some types of cereals that you cannot make at home but are packed with whole grains and fibres". In response, the Novo Nordisk Foundation has launched a project to develop a more nuanced version of the so-called NOVA classification that rates the degree of processing. NOVA 2.0 is being developed by a group at the University of Copenhagen in collaboration with the world's leading researchers in the field and will focus on health rather than the production process."

I now formally repeat the same request I made to Arne Astrup as a Vice President of the Novo Nordisk Foundation:

"Do not use the term Nova in the title or objectives of your project. Do not refer to your project as an improvement or new version of the Nova classification. Do not suggest that your project has any connection with the Nova classification or its creators".

Additionally, the term *ultra-processed food* was defined by and is an integral part of the Nova food classification system. Therefore, I ask that you refrain from using this term in any new classification resulting from your project. For the same reason, I request that you modify the title of the expert workshop you are organizing on June 16-17, 2025 in Pakhus, Islands Brygge, from *"Scientific assessment of the existing ultra-processed foods' classification systems"* to *"Scientific assessment of the existing food processing classification systems."*

I believe that failure to comply with these requests would constitute ethically unacceptable conduct in the scientific community.

The content of this letter is being shared with organizations, groups, and colleagues worldwide who have contributed to the development and application of the Nova classification.

Sincerely,

Carlos A. Monteiro

Emeritus Professor, School of Public Health, University of São Paulo   Senior Researcher, Center for Epidemiological Studies in Health and Nutrition, University of Sao Paulo