



# Policies and programmes to fight overweight and obesity



FSN Forum brief based on the online discussion, held from 14 June to 7 July 2016, facilitated by Francisca Silva Torrealba from the Catholic University of Chile and Rodrigo Vásquez Panizza from FAO Chile. Visit the discussion webpage at:

➔ [www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/overweight\\_obesity](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/overweight_obesity)

## OVERVIEW

Overweight and obesity are severe public health issues with rapidly increasing rates in developed as well as developing countries. According to the World Health Organization, 1.9 billion adults (over the age of 18) were overweight in 2014, and 600 million were obese. In addition, 42 million children under five were overweight or obese in 2013.

Despite being global problems, the causes of overweight and obesity remain poorly understood. However, Forum contributors listed a number of factors that play a role:

- lack of physical exercise (often due to sedentary lifestyles);
- excessive or inappropriate consumption;
- inadequate dietary education;
- deeply embedded dietary habits;
- unavailability or unaffordability of healthy food;
- heredity;
- psychological pressure;
- over processing of food.

In particular, the production of unhealthy food is problematic because consumption of these products is not simply a matter of free choice, but significantly conditioned by the broader economic environment. Trade liberalization, for instance,

allows for the expansion of trade in unhealthy products. Where this liberalization is not accompanied by public health measures, it can exacerbate the risk of overweight and obesity.

In a number of countries, efforts have been undertaken to fight weight problems, but the diverging interests of the stakeholders involved, reflected for instance in the lobbying activities of the food industry, have made it difficult to reach consensus on new dietary initiatives. However, in order to adequately address overweight and obesity, a comprehensive approach involving all actors is imperative.

## CRUCIAL ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE POLICIES

Considering the scale and the severity of overweight and obesity, formulating effective policies and interventions should become a collective priority. For policies to be successful, a solid understanding of the causes of weight problems and appropriate indicators are needed. At individual level this implies for instance to look beyond the calorie balance concept and consider the functioning of the complex biological system that regulates body weight as a whole. Furthermore, systemic factors like the implications

that the current food system has for consumption behaviour, should be taken into account.

There is also the need for involving different sectors at different levels. Above all, the food and beverage industry plays a key role, even though different opinions exist on its impact:

- Industry is perceived as an actor to collaborate with. It is well positioned to support consumer migration towards healthier consumption and its research and development capacity could be leveraged in public-private partnerships. Cooperation should be facilitated by adopting an incentive-based approach for the industry.
- Industry is seen as an actor whose actions should be regulated more strongly, which implies finding ways to make it accountable for its impact on health and searching for mechanisms to limit its ability to undermine health-promoting policies.

In order for a policy to achieve the desired results, it is also crucial to involve the people that are targeted. In particular, in local interventions, communities should be engaged in the policy-making process, this serving also as a stepping-stone for capacity building and empowerment. Another crucial element concerns developing a monitoring and evaluation system, as impact assessment is crucial for redirecting economic resources and redesigning strategies.

The international MEND (Mind, Exercise, Nutrition ... Do it!) programme aims to bring about lasting changes in the lifestyles of 7- to 13-year old children who are overweight or obese. MEND offers after-school courses that are constantly being improved by dietitians, nutritionists, physical activity experts and behaviour change specialists on the basis of evaluations.

## FIGHTING OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY: TAKING ACTION

Forum contributors identified a number of areas in which action should be undertaken in fighting overweight and obesity, and many contributions included examples of initiatives that have already been implemented.

- Public awareness campaigns and the promotion of healthy diets should be reinforced. In Afghanistan for instance, dietary guidelines have been released in both English and local languages.
- Physical activity should be promoted by means of providing basic structures for physical exercise and including it in the school curriculum. In Chile, physical activity constituted an important part of the *9 Steps Agenda* that was implemented in schools.
- Nutrition education should be strengthened at all levels and ages. Schools offer an appropriate environment for learning how to prepare healthy food and to promote healthy eating habits. The Argentinian Nestlé *Niños Saludables* and Lebanese *Ajyal Salima* programmes and the Polish *Wise Nutrition, Healthy Generation* project include activities to promote nutrition knowledge.
- The sale and supply of fresh products should be encouraged through multisector policies promoting local (smallholder) production and the sale of unprocessed food. In Brazil, the Intersectoral Strategy for Prevention and Control of Obesity aims to better integrate public systems and strengthen family farming in order to promote sustainable production and consumption.
- Regulations on processed food should be strengthened, in particular regarding the use of additives. In addition, processed food with a high sugar and/or fat content could be taxed as notably done in Mexico with a tax on carbonated and other sugary drinks introduced in 2014. However, taxes do not encourage a voluntary consumption behaviour change, but rather compel people to change their habits. In addition, reduced sugary drink consumption may be offset by the increased consumption of other unhealthy products.
- Marketing should take health considerations into account by providing smaller food portions and using clear food labelling. In the USA, *Facts Up Front* was created by the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the Food Marketing Institute as an easy-to-use, front-of-pack labelling system for displaying key nutrition facts.
- Advertising of unhealthy food items to children should be restricted. In Mexico, companies adopted the Self-Regulation Advertising Code of Food and Drinks for Children under the umbrella of ConMéxico.

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