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Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition

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Are there any successful policies and programmes to fight overweight and obesity?

About this online discussion

This document summarizes the online discussion *Are there any successful policies and programmes to fight overweight and obesity?* which was held on FAO's Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) from 14 June to 7 July 2016. The discussion was facilitated by Francisca Silva Torrealba from the Catholic University of Chile and Rodrigo Vásquez Panizza from FAO Chile.

The aim of the discussion was to gather additional input for the Study of international evidence of obesity reduction: lessons learned from case studies conducted by FAO and the Catholic University of Chile, in consultation with WHO. Participants were asked to share information on initiatives aiming to reduce overweight and obesity and to elaborate on their impact. In addition, the discussion included a general question on which elements are needed for a policy to be effective, and participants themselves also shared suggestions on how the problems of overweight and obesity should be addressed.

Over the three weeks of discussion, participants from 33 countries shared 70 contributions. The topic introduction and questions proposed, as well as all contributions received, are available on the discussion page:

www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/overweight_obesity

General remarks on factors contributing to overweight and obesity

Worldwide, countries are seeing increasing rates of overweight and obesity. Currently in Italy, for example, 41 percent of men and 25.7 percent of women are overweight, and 9.7 percent of the total population is obese (Robert Verna). Weight problems are however not limited to the West: in India, 20 million women and 9.8 million men were obese in 2014, and rural areas saw an eight-fold increase in obesity in the last 14 years (Kuruppacharil V. Peter). Obesity has also become a public health issue in Afghanistan (Mhammad Asef Ghyasi): in 2013, the obesity percentage for the adult population

of Jalalabad was 27.4 (Muqem Shah Miakheel). And in Africa, 12.7 percent of children are expected to be overweight by 2020 (Elizabeth Mpofu).

Although overweight and obesity have become global problems, their causes remain poorly understood (Emile Hougbo, Raghavendra Guru Srivnivasan, Salvador Camacho). Participants themselves stressed that a lack of physical exercise – often due to sedentary lifestyles – in combination with excessive or inappropriate consumption are the main causes of weight problems.

Inadequate dietary education, eating out more frequently, larger food portions and deeply embedded dietary habits (which have not been adapted to current, often less energy-demanding lifestyles) contribute to unhealthy consumption behaviour in situations where food is abundant (Lal Manavado, Ahmad Elalouani, Elizabeth Mpofo, Isaac Kamoko). Yet, where healthy products are not readily available or affordable, people can simply be forced to consume unhealthy food. In addition to unhealthy consumption patterns, artificial food ingredients, heredity and psychological pressure were mentioned as major factors causing weight problems (Emile Hougbo).

Other participants used a broader perspective in defining the causes of overweight and obesity. Reference was made to mass production that aims to achieve faster growth and cheaper production of crops and animals, involving the use of chemical inputs and genetic modification. The subsequent processing of this produce by the food industry, with its use of additives, adds to the risks these food items pose to human health; because these products

negatively impact gut bacteria, their overconsumption would contribute to overweight and obesity (Annie Luteijn). Last, the broader economic environment was highlighted as having a major impact: while trade liberalization can provide consumers with healthy options, it simultaneously enables the expansion of trade in unhealthy products (Christian Häberli, Myriam del Carmen Salazar Villarreal). Consumption is thus not simply a matter of free choice, and weight issues are also related to trade rules concerning goods, services and intellectual property, especially when these regulations are not accompanied by measures taking this into account (Christian Häberli). Although efforts have been undertaken to fight weight problems, participants mentioned that the food industry has often blocked these initiatives and impeded meaningful policy-making in general. Yet it was stressed that, in order for interventions to be effective, the private sector should still have a central role, and policies and programmes should address individual as well as broader systemic factors.

Fighting overweight and obesity: thoughts for action

In thinking about the formulation of adequate interventions, participants shared a number of ideas on areas in which action should be undertaken:

- **Public awareness campaigns and the promotion of healthy diets should be reinforced** (Roberto Verna, Carmen Rivas Gaitán, Elizabeth Mpofo Andrea Borlizzi, Lal Manavado, Vethaiya Balasubramanian).
- **Physical activity should be promoted**, which could be done by 1) providing basic structures for physical exercise (Maria Alejandra Vidal Jaramillo), such as constructing cycling paths and parking places, and making public transport bike-friendly (Andrea Borlizzi); 2) including physical activity in the school curriculum (Maria Alejandra Vidal Jaramillo), for instance by means of a course of 1–2 hours a week including nutrition education and sports activities, with schools and sports facilities also collaborating to set up extracurricular activities (Roberto Verna); and 3) promoting activities like yoga in the context of body and mind care, and in managing overweight and obesity in particular (Raghavendra Guru Srinivasan, Kuruppachari V. Peter).
- **Nutrition education should be strengthened at all levels and for adults as well as children** (Lal Manavado, Vethaiya Balasubramanian, Andrea Borlizzi, Maria Alejandra Vidal Jaramillo). The latter

should for instance learn at school how to prepare healthy food (Vethaiya Balasubramanian); school feeding programmes could promote healthy eating habits in general (Carmen Rivas Gaitán).

- **The sale and supply of fresh products should be promoted** by means of multisector policies promoting local production and the sale of unprocessed food, and by supporting smallholders in particular (Myriam del Carman Salazar Villarreal, Andrea Borlizzi, Lynn Silver). In concrete terms, this includes providing financial and technical support to producers and sellers as well as addressing broader systemic issues, like improving infrastructure (Lal Manavado).
- **Regulations on the content of processed food, in particular regarding additives, should be strengthened** (Andrea Borlizzi).
- **Trade policy formulation should be more inclusive of health considerations**, for instance by including a joint review of tariff reductions for health-promoting items by trade and health agencies (Christian Häberli).
- **Taxes should be imposed on processed food**, in particular on items with a high sugar and/or fat content (Andrew MacMillan, Elizabeth Mpofo, Lynn Silver). Two participants however noted that the following should be taken into account when

assessing the effectiveness of this measure: taxes do not encourage people to change their consumption behaviour on their own initiative, but rather compel them to do so; therefore the effectiveness of taxes would be difficult to measure (Lal Manavado). Reduced sugary drink consumption for instance does not necessarily lead to obesity reduction; beverages may be substituted with other unhealthy products, especially when potential "compensation behaviour" is taken into account (Salvador Camacho).

- **Marketing should take better into account health considerations**, which could be done by providing smaller food portions (Andrew MacMillan) and using clear food labelling (Keith Kline, Maria Alejandra Vidal Jaramillo).
- **Advertising of unhealthy food items to children should be restricted** (Andrew MacMillan, Lynn Silver).



Crucial elements for effective policies

Currently, evidence on the effectiveness of existing interventions is generally lacking, and claims about the impact of policies were mentioned (by participants) to be often exaggerated; consequently, "myths" exist concerning obesity, its prevention and its treatment (David Allisson and Anarina Murillo). Yet if policies are to be effective, first a solid understanding of the causes of overweight and obesity is needed. For instance, the calorie balance concept alone cannot explain weight problems (Salvador Camacho), which are instead related to the functioning of a complex biological system that regulates and maintains body weight (Ximena Ramos Salas and Arya M. Sharma). In addition, for a comprehensive understanding, a broader perspective needs to be adopted that recognizes the interconnectedness of the food chain and the implication this has for consumption behaviour (Salvador Camacho).

Regarding policy design and implementation, the following interrelated aspects are to be considered:

- **A holistic and culturally sensitive approach should be adopted.** Policies focusing on individual responsibility have been ineffective (Dominique Masferrer); moreover, they have contributed to the stigmatization of obesity by implying that it is caused by insufficient exercise and unhealthy eating. Measures should thus be better framed at aiming to improve health in general rather than specifically targeting obesity (Ximena Ramos Sala and Arya M. Sharma), and should consider individual and collective behaviour

as well as the broader environment (Mylene Rodriguez Leyton). Furthermore, policy-makers should also take into account that the issues of overweight and obesity are perceived in different ways: in Benin for example, the most appreciated women are generally overweight according to BMI standards (Emile Hougbo).

- **Far-reaching policy programmes need to be implemented and should be compatible**, since no policy works in isolation (Lal Manavado, Neville Rigby); this requires better collaboration between different sectors and among different levels (Christian Häberli, Lal Manavado).
- **The food and beverage industry should be central in policy design**, but very different ways were mentioned in which it should play a role. On the one hand, the need for collaboration was stressed, which should be facilitated by adopting an incentive-based approach for the industry. Cooperation could take the form of public-private partnerships, in which the research and development capacity of the industry should be leveraged. In general, it was argued, the industry would be well positioned to support consumer migration towards healthier consumption (Cécile Duprez-Naudy). Yet on the other hand, participants called for finding ways to hold the industry accountable for its impact on health (Tim Lobstein), and for mechanisms to limit its ability to undermine health-promoting policies (Tim Lobstein, Salvador Camacho). Also, human rights

covenants were cited as instruments that empower nutrition activists to demand the state and the industry to change (Claudio Shuftan).

- **Communities should be involved in local programmes** in order to ensure commitment; their engagement would also be the stepping stone for elements like capacity building and empowerment (Sebastián Peña).

- **Realistic targets and measurable objectives should be set and committed to by all stakeholders** (Cécile Duprez-Naudy).
- **A monitoring and evaluation system should be designed** (Mylene Rodriguez Leyton). Impact assessment is crucial for redirecting economic resources and redesigning strategies and interventions, if needed (Veronica Gonzalez).

Case studies on initiatives aiming to fight overweight and obesity

Participants shared a large number of existing policies and programmes that address overweight and obesity or aim to promote a healthy lifestyle in general:

AFGHANISTAN

Awareness-raising initiatives have been implemented and dietary guidelines released in both English and in local languages to enhance nutrition knowledge in communities. Yet advocacy and awareness-raising efforts still need to be strengthened (Mhammad Asef Ghyasi).

ARGENTINA

The Nestlé *Niños Saludables* school programme consists of workshops for children aged 7–13 that cover the following themes: nutritional knowledge, fruits and vegetables, daily meals, and water and hygiene. Programme results have included a substantial increase in the level of nutrition knowledge (Marcela Leal).

BRAZIL

The Intersectoral Strategy for Prevention and Control of Obesity in Brazil, involving 20 ministries and various civil society organizations, aims to better integrate public systems and strengthen family farming in order to promote sustainable production and consumption. The biggest challenge is scaling up the initiative to 5 570 municipalities (Janine Coutinho).

Another initiative is the Cardioprotective Nutritional Programme that targets outpatients over 45 years of age (previously) suffering from atherothrombotic cardiovascular diseases. The aim is to improve the understanding of dietary prescriptions and enhance dietary compliance through nutritional guidance and intensive contact with nutritionists. Although it has been shown to be effective, the proposed diet is costly, so a cheaper option will be proposed (Bernadete Weber).

International initiatives

The **EPODE International Network** (EIN) is the world's largest obesity prevention network, supporting community-based programmes in 29 countries. It aims at changing social norms, behaviour and the environment at the local level. EIN uses a bottom-up and top-down multistakeholder approach (Pauline Harper, Helen Medina).

The **Asia Roundtable on Food Innovation for Improved Nutrition** (ARoFIIN) is contributing, *inter alia*, to a benchmark study on the prevalence of obesity in Asia and on effective regional interventions. The study will act as the first reference document in ARoFIIN's next steps regarding designing and scaling up interventions in Asia (Matt Kovac).

MEND (Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do it!) describes itself as "the largest and most extensively evaluated child weight management programme in the world". It targets 7- to 13-year-old children who are overweight or obese, and operates in particular in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. MEND offers after-school courses developed by nutrition experts but conducted by trained non-specialists, allowing for rapid scaling up (Andrew MacMillan).

Be He@lthy, Be Mobile is a partnership of ITU and WHO focusing on using mobile technology for non-communicable disease prevention and treatment. It develops SMS- and app-based services to *inter alia* encourage users to change consumption behaviour (Helen Medina).

CANADA

In Canada, a policy framework called *Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights* was signed. However, comprehensive efforts to implement the policy recommendations have been lacking, and the framework's approach overly simplifies the issue by indicating that the main causes of obesity are unhealthy eating and a lack of physical activity. This also drives policy recommendations that focus on the individual level rather than the broader society (Ximena Ramos Salas and Arya M. Sharma).

CHILE

Many initiatives were mentioned, like laws on advertising and the nutritional composition of food, as well as taxes on alcohol, sugary drinks and sugar-free drinks. Currently, proposals are being assessed that would tax other types of products with high sugar content. For most of these initiatives, the results will be visible in the long term (Dominique Masferrer).

A concrete example is *Experiencia Casablanca*, which provided nutrition education and focused on increasing physical activity in primary grades 1 to 7. The project yielded positive results, but was not sustainable due to a lack of support from the authorities. Subsequently, a project was implemented at schools in Macul and Nuñoa targeting kindergarten to grade 4B, which led to a slight decrease of obesity in Macul and no change in Nuñoa. In general, it has been difficult to convince the school and parents to change consumption behaviour (Julia Kain).

Another initiative is *Santiago Sano*, consisting of various projects. For instance, the 9 Steps Agenda comprises nutrition education and physical activity in schools and includes the *Vida Sana* programme, an intensive individual-based intervention programme. A study showed that after completing nine months of this programme, 21.5 percent of the participants had improved their nutritional status. For the success of the Santiago Sano initiative, the political will of the mayor and intersectoral coordination have been crucial; likewise, community commitment and funding have been essential, but also challenging. Many interventions, however, have been funded by the food industry, so it has been difficult to ensure there is no conflict of interest (Sebastián Peña).

COLOMBIA

The Colombian Food and Nutrition Security Public Policy focuses on strategies in the following food areas: availability, access, consumption and biological utilization. Law 1355 even declares obesity and related chronic

diseases to be a public health priority. Interventions have not been regulated well, however, and there have been key challenges in how to control media influence and the availability of unhealthy food (Mylene Rodriguez Leyton).

ECUADOR

In Ecuador, the government has implemented a "food traffic light" that indicates salt, sugar and fat content. However, the intervention has led to a reduction in the consumption of milk and yoghurt, and foods with preservatives and additives which were excluded from the traffic light are still being consumed (JC Wandemberg).

LEBANON

In Lebanon, the American University of Beirut and Nestlé have joined forces to implement the government-supported *Ajyal Salima* programme, which is part of the curriculum of public schools. It consists of interactive learning activities and physical activity, and targets schoolchildren aged 9 to 11. Positive findings have included an increase in consumption of fruits and vegetables. The project has been replicated in Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Jordan (Carla Habib-Mourad).

MEXICO

Mexican policies include the National Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Overweight, Obesity and Diabetes (Laura Andrea Miranda Solís), the National Agreement for Alimentary Health, and a sugary drink tax. Most strategies target the whole population, but there has also been a specific focus on children. To assess the impact of the sugary drink tax, household expenditure and beverage sales have served as indicators – although linking economic data to epidemic data is debatable. In addition, although consumption of sugary drinks has decreased, household expenditure has not decreased accordingly (Salvador Camacho).

NETHERLANDS

The Dutch *Jongeren op Gezond Gewicht* is based on the EPODE approach. It focuses on persons in the 0–19 age group, their parents, and the direct environment (i.e. shopkeepers, companies, schools and local authorities). The movement is active in 108 municipalities and reaches over half a million people (Lideke Middelbeek).

NEW ZEALAND

Project Energize is a physical activity and nutrition school programme with a community-based approach, targeting all 242 primary schools in the Waikato region and 70 schools in other areas. Evaluations have shown

the programme to be sustainable, effective, cost-effective and efficient. Over the years, the delivery and assessment process has been refined and the health service adapted as necessary. In addition, the programme has been adapted to other settings, including schools in Ireland ([Elaine Rush](#)).

NIGERIA

In Nigeria, strategic direction documents on promoting nutritional counselling, adhering to dietary guidelines, undertaking physical activities and implementing mandatory nutritional labelling are embedded in health and nutrition policies. However, impact evaluations have been absent, as Nigeria focuses on other forms of malnutrition and undernutrition instead of obesity. In order to convince policy-makers to take action, statistics are needed showing that overweight and obesity are a problem ([Adetunji Olajide Falana](#)).

POLAND

In 2013 and 2014, the Polish Society of Dietetics, the Warsaw University of Life Sciences and the Coca-Cola Foundation conducted the nationwide Wise Nutrition Healthy Generation project. Dieticians and teachers provided nutrition education to more than 450 000 secondary school and high school students. In this context, a model of care for teenagers with weight problems was proposed. Currently, the public-private partnership project "I Choose Water" aims to make water "the first choice" for children and their parents ([Danuta Gajewska](#)).

SWAZILAND

Shukuma Swaziland has recently been implemented nationwide, giving people of all ages the opportunity to exercise through the establishment of local gym clubs. Yet the start-up kits provided by the government are insufficient, and the question remains as to what will happen when they get old or need maintenance. To ensure sustainability, general awareness raising and capacity building for local trainers should be intensified ([Patrick Dlamini](#)).

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In New York City a number of efforts primarily related to changes in environment, accompanied by education, have had positive impacts. Examples are the 2007 regulation of food, physical activity and screen time in child care settings, and changes in the school food environment, which included placing water dispensers in school canteens ([Lynn Silver](#)). There have also been far-reaching changes made in other places where declines in childhood obesity rates were measured. For example Kaiser Permanente, the Safe Routes to School Partnership and the National

PTA are running a Fire Up Your Feet campaign in Southern California to encourage kids to walk or bike to school; and all YMCA's in South Carolina have adopted Healthy Eating and Physical Activity standards to help provide kids with healthy snacks and drinks and at least 30 minutes of physical activity per day ([Jane Sherman](#)).

Industry and public-private partnership initiatives

MEXICO

Consejo Mexicano de la Industria de Productos de Consumo (ConMéxico) brings together food and beverage producers, which have undertaken the following actions to fight obesity:

- making 2 000 food items healthier options by reducing for instance their energy content and / or incorporating fibre-rich ingredients;
- implementing the Self-Regulation Advertising Code of Food and Drinks for Children;
- adopting programmes promoting health, nutrition and physical activity at the workplace, including diversification of the menu in canteens and the promotion of recreational activities ([Laura Andrea Miranda Solís](#)).

USA

The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation is an initiative through which industry, NGOs and educators pledged to collectively remove one trillion calories from their products by developing lower-calorie options. In 2012, 6.4 million calories were collectively removed ([Helen Medina](#)).

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 ([Helen Medina](#)).

The Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative is a self-regulation programme that has adopted nutrition standards, developed new, healthier foods, and made recipe improvements in food advertised to children ([Maureen Enright](#), [Helen Medina](#)).

The Alliance for Food & Health is a multistakeholder initiative with a commitment to balance interests and create actionable ideas that can inform food/nutrition policy-making ([Eric Trachtenberg](#)).

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CHILE

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COLOMBIA

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