PROMOTING HEALTHY LIFESTYLES – WHICH INTERVENTIONS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE?

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According to latest Eurostat estimates from 2014, 51.6% of the EU’s population (18 and over) is overweight.

Healthy, active lifestyles and good dietary habits start in childhood. Schools and parents have an important role to play in influencing young people and guiding them to adopt behaviours that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Governments, communities and the food and drink industry also have an important role to play.

Studies have shown that regular physical activity boosts health and wellbeing and should be considered as effective health interventions. Combined with portion control and food reformulation, analysts say the desired results could be achieved.

WHO insists that taxing sugar is an effective way to have a positive health impact.

Analysts also claim that evidence-based policy making and the ability to rely on clear methodologies to monitor progress are essential.

In this Special Report, EURACTIV analyses the existing challenges policymakers face when it comes to healthy lifestyles in the EU, as well as the several initiatives that have been taken ranging from food reformulation to action at school level.
Following an EU call to reformulate food products in order to tackle rising obesity across Europe, the Association of Greek Soft Drinks Industries (SEVA) has recently launched an initiative to reduce sugar in its products by 10%.

At the EU level, the European soft drinks industry (Unesda) has committed to reducing added sugars in its products by a further 10% by 2020. The industry says it already achieved a 12% sugar reduction between 2000 and 2015.

“We acknowledge that while sugar can be consumed in a moderate amount, excessive amounts are not good. And like all foods and beverages, our sugar products can be consumed as part of a balanced lifestyle, on condition that people do not consume them excessively,” SEVA’s president Angeliki Patroumpa told EURACTIV.com.

SEVA emphasised that the products’ reformulation should be combined with other actions such as distinct nutritional labeling, no advertisement to children under 12 years old and introduction of smaller pack sizes.

Asked if the change in the taste also changes consumers’ behaviour, Patroumpa explained that the sweetness offered by sugar is important in creating the flavour in many of the industry’s products.

“We also recognise that many consumers love the ‘traditional’ flavour of our products but are looking for ways to reduce their sugar and calorie intake,” she noted, adding that for this reason, the industry invests in innovation.

The Greek Association of Greek soft drink industry reduces sugar by 10% amid rising obesity rates

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com

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Dietitians and Nutritionists hailed the industry’s move, describing it as a “very useful and beneficial initiative for public health”.

Panagiotis Varagiannis, the association’s secretary-general, noted that consumers now have the option of choosing healthy products that could help them better and more efficiently regulate the daily calories consumed.

**ALARMING OBESITY LEVELS**

Despite being famous for its healthy Mediterranean diet, Greece is among the EU countries with the highest obesity levels.

According to the latest Eurostat figures, 66.3% of Greek men were overweight in 2014, while the rate for women reached 48.1%.

For Varagiannis, a holistic approach is needed to tackle this alarming phenomenon. In addition to food reformulation initiatives, the expert explained that awareness campaigns should be stepped up and the Mediterranean diet should be further promoted as a healthy choice.

“Dieticians and nutritionists have a key and crucial role in shaping good nutritional behaviour throughout all ages, as well as in sensitive population groups (pregnant women, breastfeeding women, infants, children and the elderly),” he said.

**FOCUS ON CHILDHOOD OBESITY**

The figures on childhood obesity are even worse. According to WHO data, in 2016 the overweight rates have increased from 34.6% to 37.3% since 2010, while the proportion of obese children in Greece has risen from 12% to 13.8%.

Yiannis Manios, a Nutrition and Dietetics professor at the Harokopion University of Athens, told EURACTIV that this “epidemic” trend is expected to increase further unless appropriate measures are taken.

He said that SEVA’s initiative is a move in the right direction, but insisted that it can only bring results if combined with other policy actions.

He said that parents often have a “wrong image” for the body of their children and consider that the slightly increased body weight is desirable and ideal. Many parents also offer their children large portions of food, believing that these are “healthy choices”.

“At the same time, the opportunities for physical exercise and active transport (ie safe transportation to school and work on foot or by bicycle) in our country are limited,” he said.

“Therefore, the state and the municipalities have a responsibility for that, both for parents’ education and for shaping a natural and social environment supportive to a healthy lifestyle,” he added.

**THE ROLE OF SCHOOL**

Professor Manios highlighted the important role of the school in teaching about healthy lifestyles.

“With regard to nutrition, the food available in the canteen or the food brought by students from home should be limited to healthy, easy-to-understand and attractive choices. This can only be achieved through actions to be implemented within the school and in partnership with parents,” he said.

In terms of physical activity, he said that what should be prioritised is the participation and “not the victory”, through non-competitive activities, which are enjoyable for all pupils, who will be able to participate equally and feel confident from their participation.

For Varagiannis, the existent prevention programs for childhood obesity in schools, although effective, are not sufficient, and a more coordinated approach is needed.

He noted that school canteens should “promote” Mediterranean diet products and a nutrition course should be added in the curriculum.
Product reformulation a success in Ireland, industry says

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com

Product reformulation, rather than taxes, has brought tangible results for public health, according to Food Drink Ireland (FDI), the main trade association for the food and drink industry.

“The impact of reformulation variations is approximately twice as effective as a tax in achieving calorie reduction,” FDI director Paul Kelly told EURACTIV.

Together with analysts from Crème Global, in 2016 Food Drink Ireland launched the Reformulation Project report, which showed significant reductions in fat, saturated fat, sugar, salt and calories achieved through reformulation.

“The report was the first of its kind in the world. Never before had the impact of reformulation on the diet of an entire nation been analysed,” Kelly explained.

In light of rising obesity rates across Europe, the food industry has taken initiatives to reduce the consumption of sugar via the reformulation of the products.

Other EU countries have imposed taxes on sugary products, in line with the World Health Organisation recommendation; however, it is still not clear if there is a positive impact on public health through taxation.

Ireland is considered to be a role model in measuring the impact of reformulation on the actual nutrient intake. The research showed that during the 2005-2012 period, the sugar content in 600 products from 14 of Ireland’s major food and drink companies fell by 14%.

The methodology used in the Irish model consists of two distinct parts: one measuring the impact of reformulated products on quantities of nutrients sold between 2005 and 2012, and the second measuring the

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impact of the reformulation on the population.

Food Drink Ireland has recently completed the collection of more recent reformulation data from member companies and the next report is due in December.

Kelly insisted that product reformulation is much more effective than taxation. To support this argument, he combined the outcome of the Food and Drink Ireland report with a study commissioned by the Irish Department of Health ahead of the introduction of a sugar tax on sweetened drinks.

According to the Irish Department of Health, the impact of the tax amounts to 2.1 Kcal per day for the adult population and 4.5 Kcal per day reductions for the young. Data provided by the FDI shows that the impact of reformulation of product variation is 4.02 Kcal per day for the adult populations, and 10.1 Kcal per day for teenagers.

"And this happens at no cost to the consumer, unlike a tax," Kelly emphasised.

REFORMULATION PLANS

At the EU level, member states have committed to reducing the sugar levels through the EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients, adopted in February 2011.

Following the first positive results, an Annex I on saturated fat was added as well as a second on added sugars.

Annex II focuses on added sugars such as sucrose, fructose and glucose, while its main objective is to set an EU framework that brings population intake levels and dietary patterns in line with national, EFSA and World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations.

WHO suggests reducing the free sugars consumption in order to decrease the risk of "Non-Communicable Diseases", recommending an intake in both adults and children of less than 10% of the total energy.

For this reason, Annex II proposed to set a general benchmark for added sugars reduction of a minimum of 10% by 2020 in food products compared to member states baseline levels in 2015.

Annex II also demanded member states to draw up national plans on the composition of food improvement by the end of 2017. According to the EU executive, member states have responded positively so far and all of them have prepared their reformulation plans.

What next steps to take in this direction will be the topic of discussion between the Commission and EU countries in the upcoming meetings of the High-level group on nutrition and physical activity on 24 and 25 October.

"Next steps will also be linked to the Action Plan on childhood obesity and the specific recommendations from the mid-term report on the implementation of the Action Plan," an EU official said.
The industry believes that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has no evidence to back its claim that sugar taxes are an effective way to improve public health. Instead, the industry says, taxes may lead consumers to cheaper brands with similar or even higher calorie content, which may undermine any positive health outcome.

According to Eurostat estimates, 51.6% of the EU's population (18 and over) was overweight in 2014. The next European Health Interview Survey (EHIS) is scheduled for 2019. The rise of overweight and obesity levels in the EU has raised eyebrows in Brussels, where a number of initiatives have been taken to tackle the issue.

WHO says the taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages “may contribute to a reduction in overweight and obesity”.

EURACTIV has asked the WHO if there is tangible evidence supporting the claim that taxation is an “effective” intervention. However, no specific evidence was provided by the time of publishing this article.

The industry says there is no concrete evidence proving that assumption. At the EU level, the UK, Ireland, Portugal, Latvia and Finland have implemented sugar taxes. The industry also pushes for product reformulation as a successful health intervention tool.

Christopher Snowdon, head of Lifestyle Economics, Institute of Economic Affairs, commented, “If taxes on soft drinks were a pharmaceutical drug, they would never be licensed by a medical authority”.

“The costs are significant while the benefits are wholly unproven. Soft drink taxes might be a good way to raise revenue and a nice way for politicians to feel that they are doing something, but they do not qualify as an anti-obesity policy. They are remarkably ineffective as a way of getting people to reduce their consumption of sugary drinks,” he told EURACTIV.

European Commission spokesperson Anca Paduraru said the EU executive neither prohibits nor encourages member states to decide about taxation of foodstuffs in their territories. But the Commission warns that an individual member states’ taxation policy cannot impede the functioning of the internal market.

“While health issues could be the most important justification for deciding to tax a foodstuff, they cannot be the only justification for taxation,” Paduraru said.

WHO: TAXATION IS AN OPTION

A WHO spokesperson insisted that implementing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) is a policy option to support a reduction in consumption of free sugars in accordance with WHO Guideline on Sugars.

“WHO has issued evidence-based guidance on the benefits of using such taxes to reduce consumption of SSBs,” the WHO official said.

The official continued saying that

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in the current food environment, it is very easy to consume too many free sugars. SSBs are a major source of free sugars in the diet, especially amongst children and adolescents.

“Evidence from Europe and worldwide shows that when countries introduce taxes, purchase and consumption of SSBs goes down, industry reformulates to remove sugar, and awareness of the health harms of excess sugar intake goes up – thus contributing to the prevention of obesity and diabetes,” the official said, adding that taxes can also cut healthcare costs and increase revenues to invest in health services.

Asked about the effectiveness of products’ reformulation, the official said it was one of several public health interventions that could bring positive results.

“Government reformulation strategies that are ambitious in scope, accountable and highly managed with specific, time-bound targets have been shown to improve the composition of foods and dietary intake.”

“The policies should be seen as part of a suite of policies required to ensure a comprehensive response to obesity and unhealthy diets,” WHO emphasised.

FOOD REFORMULATION

On the other hand, the industry has expressed doubts about the existence of concrete evidence proving that sugar taxation has a positive impact on health.

According to a study commissioned by the European Commission, taxes on high sugar, salt and fat products can reduce their consumption but not necessarily the consumption of the targeted ingredients, and can even increase the consumption of other products.

“Product substitution has important implications for the total health effects of food taxes because a food tax aimed at reducing consumption of one product or ingredient, may in fact increase consumption of other products,” the study emphasised.

The industry says it has already achieved a 12% sugar reduction between 2000 and 2015 and it has made an additional 10% framework commitment across Europe.

“We note an increasing number of pledges from national beverage associations recently in Greece but also in Spain, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the UK. We expect several others to follow in support of government-led sugar reduction initiatives and are confident that we are on the right track to deliver on our commitment by 2020,” Unesda, the European trade association representing the soft drinks industry, told EURACTIV in an emailed response.

Asked if reformulation has affected the taste and eventually, the consumers’ choices, Unesda said that if reformulation and sugar reduction lead to taste changes that are too radical, there is a risk that consumers may just switch to other beverages and continue to consume the same or even higher levels of sugars.

Unesda says that “discriminatory” food and nutrient taxes have been implemented in some member states “arguably to pursue health objectives despite the lack of evidence that such taxes are effective or have any positive impact on consumers’ health”.

“Consumers tend to substitute to other non-taxed food categories or to cheaper brands with similar or even higher calorie content, which may undermine any positive health outcome.”

Referring to the McKinsey Global Institute ‘Overcoming Obesity’ report, Unesda noted that reformulation and portion control was by far the most cost-effective intervention.

“We will achieve [our commitments] through four key levers: reformulation of our existing products; introduction of new no/low sugar products; introduction of smaller pack sizes and placing promotion behind no/low varieties to encourage consumer choice,” Unesda concluded.

CONSUMERS QUESTION SELF-REGULATION

For BEUC, the EU consumer organisation, the reformulation of current products is a “crucial measure” to offer healthier foods and reduce high levels of ‘nutrients of concern’ such as fat, salt or sugar.

However, Emma Calvert, BEUC’s food policy officer, criticised the self-regulation system, under which the industry sets its own goals on a voluntary basis.

“This means that we are relying on the food and beverage companies themselves to take action even though there is no consequence for their competitors should they opt not to reformulate. Unsurprisingly, the results have been disappointing with wide variations within product categories,” Calvert told EURACTIV.

“In 2016, an EU food platform agreed to a 10% reduction target in added sugars by 2020 in 11 key product categories. Nearly two years later, however, this process has seemingly ground to a halt with only one industry committing to reaching the target,” she added.
Education about balanced diets brings tangible results according to the vending machines lobby, while parental organisations say lawmakers should insist on good habits to tackle childhood obesity, rather than regulation.

“Parents and parents’ organisations have long demanded to tackle childhood obesity in a totally different way, by collaboration and support rather than regulation,” Eszter Salamon, director at Parents International, told EURACTIV.

“It is clear from the example of a number of countries like the United Kingdom, Hungary, and Malta, in which regulations for school meals and drinks available on school premises do far more harm than good,” she emphasised.

According to the 2014 European Health Interview Survey (EHIS), which takes place every five years, Malta, Ireland, Iceland, United Kingdom, and Hungary account for more than 5% on average of obese youngsters from 15 to 19 years old in 2014, while the EU average is 3.1%.

In July, another study was conducted by the European Commission Joint Research Centre, highlighting an alarming situation in Greece and Malta, where 39% and 38% of 11-year-old boys were obese, respectively.

In Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Croatia, Poland, Italy and Spain, the rate is higher than 31%.

SUGAR REDUCTION IS NOT ENOUGH

Salamon cited as an example her home country, Hungary, where efforts have been made over the past 60 years to make lunch the main meal for Continued on Page 11
school-aged children.

Lots of work for no return, she explained, since children do not eat food they are force-fed but they still prefer to have the main meal at home in the evening, “while during the day they mostly survive on sandwiches, chips, chocolate and all that can be eaten at the desk.”

Salamon said that “sugar content reduction, in general, is a move by producers that parents welcome, if it doesn’t mean worse taste and customer experience.”

According to her, it is important not only to focus on food and drinks, but on other psychological and physical factors such as the importance of enough exercise, or a proper and regular meal with family, without being in front of a TV screen.

Food education needs to be taught not only from school-age but much earlier. “If families do not change their eating habits and do not do it from early childhood, measures are deemed to fail.”

### EU FRAMEWORKS FOR A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Several policy frameworks rely focus on limiting exposure to less healthy food options in school premises as well as on promoting good habits from an early age.

The EU action plan on childhood obesity was adopted in 2014 and aims at halting the rise of childhood obesity by 2020. It provides not only an easy access to healthy food, but that healthy habits are taught and adopted in the school.

Asked if initiatives such as the EU action plan changed its members’ behaviour, David Irvine, Communication manager of European Vending & Coffee Service Association (EVA), replied, “Our members are very aware of both the EU and national efforts to reduce obesity rates and the EU action plan provided greater impetus for providing healthier products in vending machines”.

“But in our opinion, the greatest driver for change has been the shift in consumer and institutional demands and habits, which has been brought about by greater education on eating a balanced diet,” he noted.

Since children and young people spend much of their day at school, typically consuming at least one meal a day there, promoting healthier environments in schools is identified as one of the key priorities of the action plan.

Unesda, which represents the European soft drinks industry, announced in September 2017 that its members voluntarily cease sales of drinks containing added sugars to secondary schools across the European Union.

Also due to this commitment, “sugary drinks are not the best seller in school vending machines, particularly as many countries have bans and restrictions on the types of products that can be placed in machines,” Irvine said.

Not only products are banned, but even the vending machines themselves in French schools, something that Irvine cannot accept.

“We are encouraging and educating vending operators to diversify their product ranges, something that is being clearly observed,” he concluded.

The 2015 EVA consumer behaviour report showed that the most dispensed product for the refrigerated machines is bottled water, but water provision in schools is also, and often, through water fountains.

However, according to the healthier school checklist drawn up by FoodServiceEurope, vending machines should not be installed in areas accessible by primary school pupils, while in secondary schools, vending machines should be unbranded and only contain reduced sugar and fat options.

FoodServiceEurope released a “Model School Food” standard, to give a contribution in improving the quality of food in schools and ability of European children and adolescents aged 3 to 18 to learn and maintain healthy dietary practices.

These guidelines recommended frequencies of different food groups with some cultural adjustments in different countries and a set of nutrient-based standards in term of energy intake during school lunches and for food provided outside lunch.
The European Commission launched the Tartu Call for a Healthy Lifestyle a year ago, mostly to address rising obesity in the EU and promote physical activity, and it has already produced “concrete results”, Tibor Navracsics, the commissioner for education, culture, youth and sport, told EURACTIV.com.

“We launched the Tartu Call just one year ago in order to promote healthy lifestyles. To achieve this goal we committed to taking actions and work across policy areas such as sport, food or research. Already today, the Call has produced some concrete results,” Navracsics emphasised.

“But more needs to be done in the coming months and years to address the actions and commitments set out in the Call,” the Hungarian Commissioner said.

The Tartu Call for a Healthy Lifestyle is an initiative launched in September 2017 by the Commission’s Education and Sports, Health and Agriculture Directorates-General (DGs).

In light of the rising obesity levels combined with the health implications of inactivity, the EU executive suggested a number of actions, which aim to enhance

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people's education about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and increase investment in sports projects.

The latest Eurobarometer on sport and physical activity showed that a growing number of EU citizens abstain from exercising, with around 40% saying they don’t have the time. Particularly, 46% of respondents said that they never exercise or play sports, which represents a 4% increase compared to 2014 rates.

The Commissioner explained that the funding of projects to promote physical activity in 2018 has increased by €1 million, a 15% increase.

Ahead of the European Week of Sport (23–30 September), Navracsics noted that the Call continued to feature high on the agenda of policymakers and other stakeholders, for instance at the EU Sport Forum that took place in Sofia in March 2018 under the Bulgarian EU Presidency.

“We are also trying to raise awareness of the benefits of healthy lifestyles and have worked hard to enhance dialogue across European health and sports networks, the World Health Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).”

**ACTIONS**

The Commission has made progress in a large number of the Tartu actions, which mainly focus on young people. However, considering that a holistic approach must be adopted, tangible results are only expected in the long run.

The executive has included physical activity as a priority for the High-Level Group of government representatives on nutrition and physical activity, and of the EU Platform for Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

“Next to food reformulation and marketing, physical activity is one of the key priorities of both Groups – one of the three annual meetings is dedicated to physical activity. The new Steering Group on Promotion and Prevention has identified the Swedish experience on ‘physical activity on prescription’ as one of the best practices to promote and fund in 2018 – the implementation of this action is starting soon,” an EU spokesperson said.

In an effort to improve the collection of data on people’s attitudes and habits across the EU, the Commission holds regular discussions with member states to identify their needs in these fields and examines how EU funding can help to address the knowledge gaps.

“We are working with the network of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA) focal points and the WHO on the publication of the new country factsheets on HEPA, which we hope to publish shortly,” the spokesperson added.

In the field of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the executive has prioritised the EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme, targeting pupils at schools.

“Concerning nutrition, the current CAP is already giving a contribution to the promotion of healthy lifestyles, in particular by co-financing promotion campaigns to stimulate the consumption of fruit and vegetables, which is below the consumption of the WHO. Within the total budget for promoting EU products, fruit and vegetables have the biggest share,” the EU spokesperson noted.

“We are also planning other important moments to revisit the Tartu Call: at the 2019 EU Sport Forum, and at a conference on healthy lifestyles to be organised mid-2019 where we will take stock of progress made, and possible follow-up,” the EU official concluded.
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