



1.14 Foster a global conversation around coherence for food environment policies for healthier children

The Solution: The solution is a global conversation about how international financial institutions, UN agencies, intergovernmental institutions (e.g., OECD), academia, civil society, and donors can work together effectively towards making healthy food environment policies the norm in all countries.

An extensive consultation was conducted to identify a “game changer” on healthy food environment policies. This revealed high engagement and shared belief among a range of stakeholders that international entities are vital in advancing effective healthy food environment policies but that there is a hole in coherent working at the international level. Also emerging was a shared belief that the time is *now* to accelerate the implementation of taxes, labelling, and marketing policies to create a playing field for competition among food businesses that incentivises the production and sale of healthier foods and places competitive pressure on SMEs to innovate by lowering the cost of unhealthy foods. Vital roles for the international institutions in this process identified were:

Providing clarity and technical support on nutrient profiling. Meeting national demand for clarity on nutrient profiling on ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ foods for the purpose of policy implementation at the national and subnational level (e.g., which foods should be taxed).

Building capacity on the process of designing, implementing, and evaluating policies at country and/or sub-national levels focusing on three specific policies: taxes, labelling, and marketing restrictions.

Helping countries anticipate and overcome potential policy barriers, including providing guidelines to ensure good practice in policymaking unencumbered by vested interests (e.g., from industry).

Changing the narrative. Reflect upon ways to effectively change the narrative on healthy food environment policies (e.g., integrating child rights in advocacy; adding a gender lens; clarifying that they are ‘double duty’ policies also benefitting intake of nutritious foods).

Most international institutions are already acting in some way on healthy food environment policies (e.g., OECD advocates a clear policy package to its member countries; the World Bank develops sugary drinks tax packages for countries; WHO works on nutrient profiling models; UNICEF is developing an advocacy role; FAO works on labelling; UNDP works on sugary drinks taxes). They also represent existing structures well used by countries to drive policy. For example, UNDP works with integrated national financing frameworks (a major entry point to SDG financing and domestic fiscal space) as well as international financial institutions and bilateral donor behaviour; it is now bringing food taxes into that structure. Guidance on managing commercial determinants of health and development and the role of large businesses are part of the work of UNDP and UNWomen in the context of the SDGs. The OECD is advancing guidance on engagement with multinational enterprises. The IMF and the World Bank conduct regular policy reviews in countries, which provide economic and technical advice to the Ministry of Finance (e.g., advice on taxes and regulations affecting businesses). The WHO provide health-related guidelines and advice on “healthy” foods.

There are tremendous opportunities to build on these structures to position healthy food environment policies as essential safeguards all countries to ensure a healthy food system. Yet ways to scale and take advantage of these existing systems are absent. There is nothing that obliges them to jointly provide coherent technical support to countries in this specific area. There has been no targeted funding or timebound partnership model to make them work in practice. Nor is there a process of ensuring the agencies articulate their contribution and are accountable to do it. Thus, the opportunity to build these efforts into a force for change at the country level is under-leveraged. There is no immediate answer to this: the consultation revealed the common view that change is vital, but diverse opinions about how to



do it. For example, concerns about UN agencies' ability to formally work together and the need to engage existing networks of civil society and academia. Thus, the *actionable* gamechanger is the conversation – the dialogue – that could define the way forward, which the FSS presents the opportunity to do.

Source of the Solution: The need for mechanisms to make markets work better for healthier foods was raised early in the working group discussions. Lorena Allemandi explored the idea, working with member Sirpa Sarlio and extensively consulting with others, including academics, regional coalitions, and research funders. This indicated that the 'game changer' was not so much a single policy, but processes designed more effectively to ensure effective implementation.

Problem addressed within food systems: The current food system makes 'ultra-processed' foods, many high in sugars, fats and salt, readily accessible, affordable, appealing and aspirational, creating an environment that displaces more nutritious foods. This represents a huge inefficiency: efforts being undertaken to increase affordability and access of nutritious foods are being undermined by the more powerful palatability of cheap unhealthy foods. This threatens the well-being of children and adolescents and undermines obligations to protect and fulfil children's rights.¹ Frequent consumption of these foods increase the spread of NCDs with greater impact (80% of mortality) in LMICs; NCDs account for 72% of deaths and 75% of healthcare dollars globally. While it will never be possible to make these foods undesirable, shifting nutritious foods into the spotlight will increase their perceived affordability and appeal. Promoting healthy diets implies actions to make healthier foods more available, especially to children and adolescents, but also regulating food and beverage businesses.

The economics of food systems mean food businesses (large and small) compete on less healthy products, with larger food companies leveraging 'classic' brands while innovating new products, and smaller brands mimicking them to make unhealthy snacks and drinks even more widely available at lower prices. There are many lock-ins to changing this economy towards a more diverse, thriving food economy that places nutritious foods in the spotlight. Not least, the tempting, palatable nature of these foods and the way they are sold and marketed habituate young people to these foods, thus generating demand and stimulating further competition between businesses for their loyalty. The playing field is uneven: limited access to and low aspiration for nutritious foods, even when affordable, versus high access, affordability, and aspiration for 'unhealthy' foods. Breaking this negative cycle will require a space that incentivises competition for healthier foods, including those produced by SMEs (Solution 13) through a fair, healthy playing field for competition. Government policies, implementable at a national and municipal level, can help level that playing field through labelling, levies, and marketing restrictions. All of these policies influence food company practices, shifting them towards contributing to healthier food environments and protecting children's rights. Indeed, they can help the food businesses who are willing to lead change.

Yet these healthy food policies face numerous barriers to effective design and implementation at national and municipal levels, including outright opposition and debates about what is defined as 'unhealthy.' Moreover, as explained above, there is a missed opportunity to build on international efforts to drive these policies forward to ensure that countries have what they need when designing and implementing healthy food policies and are encouraged to do so as part of sound policy-making.

How this solution will address that problem: The solution addresses this problem in an actionable way by starting by hosting a Global Conversation around Coherence for Food Environment Policies for Healthier Children. The conversation could be convened by trailblazing international entities in this space (e.g., PAHO, UNDP, World Bank, UNICEF, OECD) or a donor and focus on how these actors could bring together their actions to more effectively support national-level implementation (involving countries in that conversation to ascertain need). This will *enable the delivery* of effective policy in countries, making

¹ <https://www.unicef.nl/files/Advocacy-brief-healthy-food-enviro-final.pdf>



it easier for bilateral agencies and funders to come together in support of these policies, sending a strong signal that these policies should be the norm. The output would be widespread adoption of these policies, effectively designed and enforced. The outcome would be people living in healthier food environments, better informed and less distracted by the affordability and appeal of foods that compete with nutritious foods, and governments both more supported and accountable for designing and implementing effective healthy food policy. The **impact** would be that people consume healthier diets and food businesses large and small are competing on healthier foods.

Solution's alignment to the 'game changing and systemic solution' criteria: This is game-changing because this conversation (which has been waiting to happen but has not yet happened) would change the rules of the game about how the international system works together in this space. This would then change the operational rules within which food businesses conduct business, internationally and nationally.

Impact potential at scale: The purpose of the conversation is to be able to optimise existing structures that operate at scale.

Actionability: This is a conversation that UN agencies and others want to have, now, as part of the Summit process. Moreover, ignoring these policies would risk undermining the benefits of other solutions designed to advance nutritious foods.

Existing evidence: While food is very different to tobacco and should not be viewed as the same, the experience of effective tobacco control is that it was only when there was strong global support for taxation and other legislative approaches, and clarity about managing vested interests, that change really happened. For climate, until the Paris Agreement, there was no consistent approach to reducing use of fossil fuels. The need for this consistency is evident if healthy food policies are to become the normal operating space for successful food businesses. There is also growing evidence behind these policies, including that taxes have modest but positive impacts on purchasing as well as stimulating reformulation,² that advertising influences children's food preferences and intake,³ and that when marketing is regulated there are reductions in exposure to unhealthy food advertising^{4,5}. Also, when well-designed, labelling stimulates awareness and knowledge about the content of packaged foods, reduces sales of unhealthy products, and positively influences choosing healthier food options⁶.

Current/likely political support: The next phase of work by the working group is to identify who could lead this conversation, building on widespread consultation. It will also identify interest among member states who have introduced some of these policies and mobilise civil society for public support at the country level.

Contexts for which this is well suited: These policies are needed in every country.

² Popkin BM, Ng SW. Sugar-sweetened beverage taxes: Lessons to date and the future of taxation. *Plos Medicine*. 2021 Jan 7;18(1):e1003412.

³ e.g., Boyland et al, 2016. Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food and nonalcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults. *AJCN* 103(2), pp.519-533.

⁴ Reyes M, et al. (2020). Changes in the amount of nutrient of packaged foods and beverages after the initial implementation of the Chilean Law of Food Labelling and Advertising: A nonexperimental prospective study. *PLoS medicine*, 17(7), e1003220

⁵ Mediano Stoltze F, et al. Prevalence of Child-Directed Marketing on Breakfast Cereal Packages before and after Chile's Food Marketing Law: A Pre-and Post-Quantitative Content Analysis. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2019; 16: 4501.

⁶ Croker, H., et al. (2020). Front of pack nutritional labelling schemes: a systematic review and meta-analysis of recent evidence relating to objectively measured consumption and purchasing. *Journal of human nutrition and dietetics*, 33(4), 518–537.