

Peer learning sessions of the 2021 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region

Presentation of policy practices as a basis for the peer learning discussion

Session 1.2. Accelerating SDG progress in time of pandemic: making healthy diets accessible for all

Title of intervention, country and name of presenter	Promoting healthier diets through the reformulation and reduction of sugar and salt in food and drink, and monitoring the food environment
Brief description	In 2017, 64% of adults and 30% of children were overweight or obese in England. Since 2006 the UK has challenged the food industry to reduce the salt content of foods through a programme of voluntary salt targets. Since 2016, a similar approach has been employed for reducing sugar. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the poor health of the nation. Obese COVID-19 patients have a higher risk of hospitalisation and death, with lower socio-economic status and being of an ethnic background also resulting in worse outcomes. Yet measures to tackle COVID-19 are exacerbating risk factors eg. reducing the ability to exercise or increased snacking and driving inequalities
Policy goal(s) or challenge(s) to be addressed	England has set an ambition to half childhood obesity by 2030 and a mission of ‘five more years of healthy, independent life by 2035, whilst narrowing the gap between richest and poorest’. Many of our trends are going in the wrong direction. Being overweight is now the number one health risk factor, having overtaken smoking. Two thirds of adults and increasing numbers of children (around one fifth of those aged 4-5 years and one third of those aged 10-11 years), are living with excess weight and obesity. Higher rates of obesity are seen in the less well off with the gap in obesity prevalence in children widening between those who are in the highest and lowest income deciles. Additionally, more children are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.
Instruments and proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent review of the evidence 1) carbohydrates and health and 2) evidence to support population level interventions • Food and drink product improvement through a structured, closely monitored, voluntary sugar reduction and wider reformulation programme (salt, calories, commercial baby food and drink) and a mandatory soft drinks levy • Monitoring of the association between obesity and severe outcomes from COVID-19 and the shift in the food environment during COVID-19 restrictions • 2020 strategy to tackle obesity in adults and children – a new campaign, resourcing of weight management services, calorie labelling on menus and alcohol, ending promotions of unhealthy foods, strengthening front of pack labelling and advertising restrictions

<p>Constraints and difficulties</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reformulation programme requires high resource to fund quality, independent monitoring of progress and maintain high level stakeholder engagement. It requires a recognition by all sectors of industry that they have a responsibility to take action and to actually make changes to what they make and sell. There is an increasing consumption of foods outside the home, but historically less recognition from this sector that they have a role to play, although this appears to be changing for some businesses, as well as poorer data on the nutritional content making it more difficult to hold this sector to account. • Successes in product improvement are undermined by continued growth sales • Need to have political will and strong leadership to ensure implementation of legislated policies
<p>Lessons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we knew that progress was not fast enough, our obesity and overweight prevalence rates in adults and children are not reducing and the socioeconomic divide continues to grow • COVID-19 has highlighted the dire consequences of an unhealthy nation, but a problem that has been decades in the making will not reversed overnight
<p>Links to additional materials</p>	