

Summary report on the

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**Expert meeting to finalize
a regional roadmap
to address unopposed
marketing of unhealthy
foods/beverages to
children in the Eastern
Mediterranean Region**

Cairo, Egypt
21–22 June 2016



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

Childhood overweight and obesity have reached alarming levels, both globally and in the World Health Organization (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean Region. In 2014, an estimated 41 million children under five years of age were overweight or obese, with the Region ranked third in prevalence, closely behind the Region of the Americas. Global data shows that in absolute numbers there are more overweight or obese children living in low- and middle-income than high-income countries. However, in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, child overweight or obesity has become a notable public health challenge in high-income countries, affecting more than 50% of children in certain age groups.

Obesity is a key concern because it may cause chronic noncommunicable diseases, has the potential to negate health gains and may affect quality of life and life expectancy. In the Region, noncommunicable diseases are already responsible for over 50% of mortality and more than 60% of the disease burden, with countries facing challenges in responding to current health needs. Policy measures that address the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity are of critical importance in preventing and mitigating noncommunicable diseases. A key factor in the rise in childhood overweight and obesity is the widespread growth of an obesogenic environment with increased marketing of foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars or salt, specifically targeting children. Studies have shown that the marketing of these types of foods influences children's food preferences, requests and consumption.

In 2010, the Sixty-third World Health Assembly in resolution 63.14 endorsed a set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children and called on Member States to restrict the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free-sugars or salt.

In 2011, the United Nations (UN) Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases urged Member States to promote the implementation of these recommendations. In 2012, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed a regional framework for action, with strategic interventions and indicators to assess country progress, as a road map for countries to implement the UN Political Declaration. Subsequently, in 2014, a ministerial panel discussion on the prevention of noncommunicable diseases held during the Sixty-first session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean raised concern over the largely unopposed commercial practices that promote unhealthy products, particularly those targeting children, and in 2015, WHO held an open forum on addressing unopposed marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children in Amman, Jordan.

Against this background, WHO organized an expert meeting to finalize a regional roadmap to address unopposed marketing of unhealthy foods/beverages to children in the Eastern Mediterranean Region held in Cairo, Egypt on 21–22 June 2016. The expert meeting was attended by global and regional experts in the areas of childhood overweight and obesity, marketing, the media and public health, and WHO staff from headquarters and regional levels.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- review the open forum recommendations;
- review the current evidence; and
- agree on a roadmap to address unopposed marketing of unhealthy foods/beverages to children in the Region.

2. Key challenges in the Region

The Region has a particular problem with childhood overweight and obesity, with rates reaching as high as 14% and 22% amongst adolescent's aged 13–15 in some countries. There is a well-established evidence base showing that the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages is driving this epidemic.

The Region represents a major and rapidly growing market for the unhealthy food and beverage industries and these industries are among the top spenders on marketing. While marketing of unhealthy food and beverages is already extensive, increases in expenditure and the number of communication channels mean that it will continue to grow.

Television remains the most important medium for advertising unhealthy food and beverages, but advertising through digital media is also growing rapidly.

Extensive use is also made of celebrities and sponsorship of youth-oriented programmes and events.

An increasingly common language and culture among young people is extending the reach of marketing beyond national borders, especially via private satellite television broadcasting outlets. This cross-border marketing requires regulation in both source and recipient countries.

As a response to the above challenges, WHO has launched a regional initiative to address the issue with the support of global experts and through various forms of consultation, to explore strategic ways to address unopposed marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages specifically targeting children.

3. Summary of discussions

Plan to address unopposed marketing of unhealthy food and beverages

A plan has been developed as part of the regional effort to implement the recommendations in the UN Political Declaration and regional framework for action on noncommunicable diseases prevention and control related to the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages. The focus of the plan is on the best interest of the child, with particular reference to their human rights.

Addressing unopposed marketing will require a multifaceted response comprising legislation, social mobilization and health/media/marketing literacy. It will also need to involve multiple sectors and stakeholders from health, education, media, finance, trade, academia and civil society.

The experts identified 12 cost-effective key evidence-based interventions, which Member States should take both individually and collectively, outlined in the recommendations in section four below.

The scope of the initiative should be to: set standards; introduce controls to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and beverages; monitor marketing trends (exposures, types, techniques and expenditure); and encourage healthier behaviour.

Preparatory steps

Member States should adopt a robust system of nutrient profiling. This is an essential first step in identifying those foods and beverages that should not be promoted to children. Recommended nutrient profiling systems can be provided by WHO.

In addition, WHO will:

- develop a methodology to monitor digital marketing;
- develop the capacity of academic bodies and consumer protection organizations to address the issue of marketing and children's exposure to marketing and measure and monitor the form it takes in mainstream and digital media, and produce a status report;
- demonstrate the economic cost of inaction and include an equity perspective;
- facilitate a workshop for senior level policy-makers, especially in health, trade and finance, on the power of marketing, explaining the practices used by companies to influence both consumers and stakeholders;
- develop effective messages to be used as part of ongoing social marketing;
- use the convening role of WHO to facilitate the implementation of regulatory measures to contain cross-border marketing of unhealthy food and beverages; and
- ensure policy coherence among UN organizations.

4. Recommendations

The following strategies and interventions for Member States were identified by the experts to address the unopposed marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.

1. Ban advertising of food high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars or salt to children in all media.
2. Specify children's television watching hours for no advertising of food high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars or salt; for example, no advertising if 10% of the audience is under 16 years or no advertising before 22.00 hours.

3. Ban marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars or salt in school premises and surroundings, as well as other places frequented by children (such as hospitals).
4. Introduce effective taxes (above 20%) on sugary drinks.
5. Mandate interpretive front of pack labelling supported by the public education of both adults and children for nutrition literacy.
6. Ban the use of branded and licensed cartoons, toys, gifts and other inducements.
7. Impose a levy on remaining marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to fund public authorities to monitor impact of policies.
8. Undertake consistent social marketing and school-based education to increase awareness and understanding of the harms and manipulation caused by unhealthy food and beverage marketing.
9. Adapt the school curriculum to educate children (and parents) about the manipulative and harmful nature of unhealthy food and beverage marketing.
10. Work with audiovisual and broadcasting authorities (satellite television and other channels) to control cross-border advertising.
11. Set up a mechanism for people to express their concerns, such as a hotline.



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