

Call for comments on the draft WHO Guideline: Fiscal policies to promote healthy diets

Comments on the draft guideline

EuroHealthNet, 23 January 2023

EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit European partnership of organisations, agencies and statutory bodies working on public health, health promotion, disease prevention, and reducing inequalities. With a long-term commitment to health, equity, and wellbeing EuroHealthNet recognises the importance of timely and comprehensive action to promote healthy diets for all.

1. Overall clarity of the guideline

EuroHealthNet compliments the drafting team on developing this WHO guideline on fiscal policies to promote healthy diets. The document presents a clear line-up of most relevant and quality-graded evidence, as well as considerations for the guideline implementation. Mentions of **what the guideline is not intended to do**, are appreciated in order to avoid misunderstandings; however, these should be better exposed and presented in the executive summary and/or the introduction section.

Given that **the executive summary of the guideline is rather long**, we encourage you to consider shortening it or making (visually) clearer the executive summary is a prelude to the further document. Currently, a lot of the information in the two sections seems to be overlapping and repetitive. As an alternative, these two parts could be merged with an accompanying abstract upfront.

Secondly, we believe that a point made in the guidelines' scope and purpose, namely that "no single intervention can ensure that all aspects of the food environment support healthy diets" and that therefore "a comprehensive package of policy actions is required" should be emphasised more throughout the document. The **systems-thinking underpinning the rationale** for the guidelines should make it clear that WHO is delivering the publication as part of a series of **all-angle tools to create health and sustainability-supportive food and living environments**. We suggest adding that **the efficiency of a specific policy is undermined if it is not accompanied by a systemic change**. For example, policies to foster consumption of fruit and vegetables (0% VAT, etc.) are more efficient in a system where marketing of health-undermining products such as HFSS is regulated and the prices of the HFSS products reflect the wider societal consequences (disease burden, social systems burden). Hence, it should also be specified that if implemented all together, the efficiency of each would likely increase.

Finally, it is our observation that **the narrative related to the presentation of the results is discouraging**, namely stressing continuously the lack of sufficient evidence to prove their efficiency. It should thus be stressed better the "it has not yet been proven" due to the fact that many countries have not yet implemented such policies. We are simply **cautious of**

how the current narrative may unconsciously reaffirm and/or cause a legislative chill-off effect.

2. *Considerations and implications for adaptation and implementation of the guideline*

In terms of implementation of the guideline and the fact that it explicitly mentions that "Despite progress in this area, governments continue to face challenges in their attempts to develop fiscal policies to promote healthy diets, often resulting in weakened, delayed or defeated policies", we would recommend to **explicitly identify the sources of such harmful actions**. That is to say, the for-profit food and drink industry and business operators. The document does not go into detail regarding what the specific challenges are that governments continue to face. We can assume that many of these have to do with industry involvement, and lobbying activities, which have resulted in measures based on self-regulation and voluntary enforcement. The document should **clearly identify and clarify on the added or undermining value of self-regulatory and voluntary activities and initiatives from the industry and economic operators in the field**.

Considering the section of the guidelines that contains the WHO Recommendations, we were wondering if the three recommended actions could not better capture and use of stronger policy language to send a convincing message to decision- and policy-makers active in the fiscal policies field. The implementation section does consider the diversity of WHO regions and Member States, including their various situations and contexts, available resources and capacities, as well as existing policies and governance structures. This being said, when it concerns the **countries' institutional arrangements relevant to fiscal policies, EuroHealthNet suggests these should explicitly describe states' and authorities' capacities to manage good governance and conflict of interests (COI) policies at place**.

For Recommendation 1, EuroHealthNet suggests adding various governance levels at which sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) could be taxed. While the text mentions the fact that "the recommendations may require adaptation to the local context of WHO regions and Member States", currently, **the level of responsibility for development and implementation of an SSB is not yet well-defined**. Furthermore, we believe the **health equity and human rights leverage potential calls for a standalone point under the rationale provided**. It is one of the most critical aspects of the policies analysed, yet one that is more often under constant attack and doubt-inflicting by the opponents of an SSB, **hence highlighting its inaccuracy here would be advantageous**. This could simply be done through bringing in some of the messages developed as part of the recent WHO guideline document in this area. Demonstrating how taxation of SSBs can contribute to health equity and safeguard people's right to health is therefore essential point to make.

Similarly, Recommendations 2 and 3 should adopt the same course and **clearly bring to the forefront an equity and rights-based approach to fiscal policies applied to diets**.

3. Context and setting-specific issues that have not yet been captured

Fully aware of the fact that the guideline document considers fiscal policies employed for guiding healthy diets, EuroHealthNet nevertheless suggests **that issues of sustainability of dietary choices are considered in this regard**. The reason for that is that in line with the newly emerged concepts of One Health and Planetary Health, diets and food systems cannot be only seen for their health-contributing element. **Rather, it is their health, equity and inclusion, as well as sustainability components that must be considered as one**. Healthy products that are unsustainably produced will also undermine health, albeit through different pathways. In European health and food policies' contexts, **such narratives have been taken up by several ongoing multi-country policy and research collaborations**, notably EU Member States **Joint Action on Implementing Validated Best Practices on Nutrition (JA Best-ReMaP)**. A new **HorizonEurope-funded research project FEAST** that aims to shift European food systems away from the current 'Lose-Lose-Lose-Win' food systems where large food corporations are the only 'winner' at the expenses of the public sector, health, and the environment, towards a food system that benefits all groups in society. **As part of comprehensive, systems-oriented solutions, well-conceived fiscal policies can and should also be employed in guiding consumers and food systems for making more sustainable and greener dietary choices**. The evidence behind linking health and nutritional outcomes (NCDs prevalence) with the sustainability value of food systems and products has been emerging and should be taken up in the current publication. This has been the case for ultra-processed food products (UTPs) and products high in trans fatty, sugar, and salt content (HFSS). **Should this set of guidelines not be a place for doing so, EuroHealthNet suggests an appropriate and complementary publication be developed in alignment with the current one**. Looking forward, we strongly believe the two issues – in a twin-approach (or triple if equity concerned) – will become increasingly more relevant and 'actionable', hence laying out pathways and foundations for how to combine both will present a major policy challenge that needs to be conceptualised already today.

4. Errors of fact or missing data

As stated in the previous point, should the publication make space for including data and evidence on the (potential of) use of fiscal policies for guiding and promoting healthy and sustainable diets, EuroHealthNet would be keen to support it.

5. General comments

EuroHealthNet applauds WHO for developing guidelines to promote healthy diets and looks forward to seeing regional follow-up on this global publication. Should this be the next step taken, we encourage you to consult with our members, European states' public health authorities and health promotion agencies. We stand ready to facilitate this activity. Further supporting inclusive and participatory policies, we also **encourage WHO and its regional offices to consult with organisations and networks representing civil society and**

end beneficiaries of fiscal policies – consumers, various population groups and communities.



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