

>> **Obesity and control strategies**

Ciudad de México >> 06 >> 2013

OBESITY, MUCH MORE THAN JUST A HEALTH ISSUE

Recently a number of Latin American countries have undergone strong health regulatory processes aimed at preventing and treating Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) which, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), represent one of the main challenges the world has to face in the 21st century due to the implications they have, not only for health but also for social and economic development¹.

From that perspective, the treatment of NCDs is a strategic issue in which governments; enterprises and broader civil society are involved within a complex framework where health is a fundamental public good for social activity as well as an economic asset widely connected to public expenditure on health and to an opportunity-cost issue related to productivity, competitiveness and employment².

The WHO calculates that NCDs result in 63% of annual deaths worldwide, which represents over 36 million people who die from causes somehow related to these diseases. The WHO also notes that, in the event that the risk factors associated to the aforementioned diseases were eliminated, around three-quarters of the burdens of disease attributable to cardiovascular issues, high blood pressure, brain strokes, chronic kidney disease, type 2 diabetes and 40% of cases of cancer would be reduced³.



Hence, in the last few years, a trend has been created towards different treatments for the main risk factor and the common denominator of NCDs: **overweight and obesity**.

Governments, private sector and civil society all around the world have generated various strategies with the objective of addressing this public health issue, some of which have become trends and transmission practices, and they have even been used as political and social activism flags.

This article seeks to make a quick review of the strategies with greater impact on overweight and obesity prevention and control worldwide, with particular emphasis on Latin America, with the purpose of identifying patterns and proposing new angles to the analysis which are expected to facilitate the creation of related public affairs strategies.

SIX CONTROL STRATEGIES

1 Media campaigns combined with strategic relations. The increasing influence of NGOs is a phenomenon which has occurred in many countries and which seems to follow a similar developmental path at international level. In the present context, organizations are becoming increasingly professional and specialized and have focused their activity on influencing key audiences that support their interests through high-impact communication actions and strategic relations with decision-makers.

In Mexico, for instance, the civil organization “El Poder del Consumidor” (Consumer Power) is making important efforts in order to reach with its messages the public opinion and members of the public sector, such as legislators and civil servants of the Executive Branch. They propose a new vision where society and the authorities are victims of manipulation by companies, who put their own economic interests above the general interest, particularly in the food and drink industry.

For this purpose, they work with experts in public relations, advertising and lobbying, they build coalitions with peer

¹ Prevention and Control of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases: Implementation of the Global Strategy, WHO, 61st World Health Assembly, 18 April 2008.

² Muñoz, Onofre y Durán, Luis (2003). Health Economics. International Seminar. IMSS.

³ 10 facts on non-communicable diseases, WHO, March 2013. http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/noncommunicable_diseases/es/index.html

organizations, they participate in the creation of knowledge in order to influence public decision-making in an informed way and they also generate discussion and analysis forums with the aim of committing the authorities to their cause, always prioritizing social interests and not the private sector, among other strategies.

2 Labelling. Product regulation and labelling is one of the most used non-tariff control strategies since it has a direct influence in the customer's purchasing decision and in the consumption of products for sale to the ultimate consumer.

The aim of these strategies is to empower customers' decisions with tiered objectives ranging from providing information about ingredients and the content of these ingredients in food products or raising awareness about the implications of ingredients for consumers to including health warning messages to help reduce the purchase and consumption of the mentioned ingredients.

The European Commission has recently promoted the establishment of a red traffic light for products that are, according to them, excessively high in calories and saturated fats with the objective of helping reduce overweight and obesity rates among the population. Although this initiative was finally not carried out, discussions of this issue surpassed borders and it became an international reference.

In 2012, Chile enacted the 20606 Law, inspired by the existing European rules, which directly affects product labelling.

The Government of the United Kingdom has recently promoted an agreement to oblige companies to adopt the red traffic light system. In the United States and more specifically in Atlanta, this red traffic light system has already been implemented in carbonated drinks.

3 Product advertising, promotion and sponsorship. Another control strategy launched by various governments, specially the one targeting specifically children, consists on restricting advertising, promotion and sponsorship of products with a high content of calories, fats and salt.

In Spain, the self-regulation code (PAOS) has lately been ratified by many companies that committed to remove

“Overweight and obesity are the major risk factors for Chronic Non-communicable Diseases”

television advertising aimed at children under the age of 12 and Internet and social network advertising aiming at minors under 15.

The reason for this initiative launched by governments, social organizations and academic and research institutions is that children are considered a vulnerable audience which is important to protect with the purpose of ensuring a better future for them and for society as a whole.

In Mexico, for instance, manufacturers of Infant Formula signed a collaboration agreement with health authorities regarding the promotion and marketing of their products, which also include a strict self-monitoring process. Such agreement has the objective of protecting and promoting exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months. This is quite an interesting public policy for both sectors of the country.

4 Limiting the use of some specific ingredients. In countries such as Portugal, the use of specific ingredients in products has been criminalized if these ingredients exceed a pre-defined level. In the case of bread, for example, the level of sodium has been limited to 1.4g per 100g of bread.

As regards products with high levels of sugar, the approach to the industry's target audience (children and teenagers) has been strengthened. According to the authorities, banning the sale of food and drinks containing high levels of sugar in educational establishments is one of the best strategies since it reduces consumption.

5 Imposing and/or increasing taxes on products. In the case of Mexico, since 2011, many private initiatives in the country have suggested to increase by 20% tax rates on sugar-sweetened beverages.

Many political leaders, regardless of their political parties, take advantage of the favorable social humor regarding the obesity issue in order to increase their space in the media and in the public gallery.

In Europe, namely in Denmark, a special tax on products containing more than 2.3% saturated fats was approved with the aim of reducing access to them. Nevertheless, due to the internal pressure and given that Denmark has a high rate of butter consumption, the tax was withdrawn.

In Hungary and Romania, this kind of tax measures were finally accepted by society, provided that the extra resources were earmarked for health policies.

6 Government programs. Let's Move!⁴ is a clear example of public programs created with the purpose of transforming the legislation or proposing new laws regarding a specific issue. In this case, the United States' First Lady, Michelle Obama, launched this program dedicated to solving the growing problem of obesity within a whole generation by combining strategies with common sense.

The fact that the initiative underlines that Afro-Americans and Hispanics want to face this type of problems also shows its political nature. Given that the Afro-American community strongly supports President Barack Obama's Administration



⁴ Let's Move! Website: <http://www.letsmove.gov/learn-facts/epidemic-childhood-obesity>

and also that Hispanics have been considered as the community with the highest growth potential in the United States, it is clear that this program was designed on the basis of political principles and calculations.

FIVE ANALYSIS APPROACHES

1 Overweight and obesity, a complex issue. A very common mistake in the public debate regarding overweight and obesity is to make a simplistic interpretation and associate it to single factors such as the consumption of products containing certain ingredients.

When this view is radicalized, a debate sometimes arises in terms of heroes and villains in which the objective changes: eliminating options for a wide range of consumers with different tastes and needs.

A realistic view, which accepts the challenge of complexity, assumes that overweight and obesity are a multifactorial issue with many determinants such as sedentary lifestyles, poor eating habits and genetic, metabolic, emotional, economic, social and cultural factors, among others.

Therefore, any attempt to provide a strong response to this public health problem will have to take into account the complexity of the issue and that its plans of action must be based on a comprehensive approach.

In other words, a serious discussion must be encouraged in which overweight and obesity are more than just a matter of "bad products".

2 Who decides? A path of effective action should identify who is who in the decision makers and key influencers map, performing a balancing act of powers and putting them all into play in a context that takes into account at least the economic, political, social and legal environment, specific to each country and / or locality.

Likewise, it is indeed important to highlight that in order to ensure that a plan of action progresses, it must include the participation of public, private and sectors, which contribute to consensus-building and to fortify projects for a proper implementation.

"There are many different strategies to eradicate overweight and obesity, the most effective so far is the one consisting on promoting a cultural change"

In this context, particular emphasis should be put on the importance of powerful, influential and pressure groups like the various guilds grouped in chambers, trade unions, associations and political parties.

Finally, it may be noted that in order to be successful in generating new trends and opinions among these actors, common factors and points of agreement must be found and some schemes should be suggested underlining the benefits that everyone will obtain so that the construction of win-win relations is ensured, in terms of cost-opportunity and/or cost-benefit.

3 Legal vs inappropriate. An analysis approach that is always convenient is one that opposes everything that, although it might be included in the regulatory framework, may be regarded as inappropriate.

In certain controversial discussions that take place outside the decision-makers and technical sphere and that sometimes reach the public opinions' ears, moral arguments normally prevail over legal arguments.

A public-impact strategy regarding overweight and obesity must have a strict adherence to local law with the objective of being clear about the framework of operation permitted by the authorities and, if possible, it should take account of good global practices to use them as a reference.

It is mandatory to conduct a feasibility and legal study on the basis of regulation. However, the analysis of the "moral" framework, from a social and cultural point of view, is a recommended fortifying element is social support is to be garnered.

In this context, it is important to have a structure of facts and evidence supported, if possible, by scientific processes and subject to consensus of authorities and experts in the field.

When an issue is discussed and judged in front of cameras and microphones, moral and cultural arguments are actually an important factor for decision making, yet evidence and verifiable facts are also of great relevance.

4 Education and cultural change. According to a generalized agreement of the international scientific community, people gain weight as a result of a lack of energetic balance, particularly caused by a higher calorie intake combined with lower calorie expenditure.

Even though there are many different strategies to eradicate overweight and obesity, the most effective so far is the one consisting on promoting a cultural change that facilitates the adoption of new eating behaviors and healthy lifestyles, although it seems to be the option that takes longer to implement.

That is the reason why everyone immediately agrees on the issue of education. Education at home, parents educating their children but also the other way around; at school, teachers educating children; in enterprises and work environments, encouraged by Human Resource departments and social responsibility; and also the education transmitted through mass media and targeted advertising strategies.

A comprehensive action plan that must include the promotion of health and of a healthy lifestyle that supports the sustainability, feasibility and success of the developed projects.



5 Willingness. For the last 30 years, the world has experienced a wave of self-regulation, mainly promoted by companies with a global presence which, after having to face many regulation processes in all markets, decided to promote standards of conduct to enhance the marketing of their products in different countries, both through internal policies and guidelines agreed with the other members of the industry.

In addition, international bodies such as those belonging to the United Nations system promote global reference tools with the purpose of helping direct the action of

companies which take part of industries of products for human consumption, such as the well-known PABI Code and CODEX, among others.

These self-regulation strategies are effective for companies, not only because they systematize their global action and facilitate the marketing of their products and services, but also because they are examples of good will towards the authorities. This facilitates a proper dialogue between them as well as the development of close links in the interests not only of the companies' reputation but also of their action and negotiation capacity towards society and the authorities.



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