



CARBONATING THE WORLD

The Marketing and Health Impact of Sugar Drinks
in Low- and Middle-income Countries

Executive Summary

Public health officials, researchers, health advocates, and the public have become increasingly concerned about the over-consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs, including sugar-sweetened carbonated soft drinks, energy drinks, teas, fruit drinks, and others), because scientific research has determined that excessive consumption increases the risks of tooth decay, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Publicity in the United States about that evidence, for example, has helped decrease per-capita consumption of sugar drinks by 25 percent between 1998 and 2014. Declines have also occurred in other high-income nations. However, that is not the case globally.

The two major global soft-drink producers, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, have sought to maintain their profits in the face of declining sales in wealthier countries by, like the tobacco industry, investing heavily in low- and middle-income countries. Thus, both companies, as well as other multinational and local beverage producers, are spending several billion dollars a year in such countries as Brazil, China, India, and Mexico to build bottling plants, create distribution networks, and advertise their products to maximize sales.

The effects of intensive marketing of sugar drinks may best be seen in Mexico. That country is one of the biggest consumers of those drinks and has some of the highest rates of obesity in the world. The Mexican government is seeking to reverse that health crisis by imposing a modest excise tax on sugar drinks (and a sales tax on snack foods), with industry fighting back vigorously. However, few other countries have adopted any measures to prevent or reduce excessive consumption of sugar drinks and the serious health and costly health-care consequences that are sure to follow.

Some companies have voluntarily disclosed calories on containers and refrained from selling sugar drinks in schools, but they have opposed legislation and their timid self-regulatory measures have done little to restrain the marketing or consumption of the products. Hence, for the sake of the public's health, nations, the World Health Organization, companies, and civil society need to take more vigorous steps, including:

Countries should:

- Make improved nutrition (regarding SSBs and other parts of the diet) a top priority, especially in light of the global obesity epidemic. Health ministries should work with other relevant ministries (including taxation, agriculture, justice, and trade), as well as with civil society organizations.
- Restrict the sugar content of beverages to about one-fourth of current levels—probably the simplest, most effective way to prevent health problems related to added sugars.
- Levy excise taxes on sugar drinks that would boost prices by at least 10 to 20 percent, using the revenues to sponsor health programs.

- Mount well-funded public-education campaigns to discourage consumption of sugar drinks (and other unhealthy foods).
- Protect children by barring the advertising and sale of SSBs (and other unhealthy foods) in schools and advertisements for sugar drinks in all media (including the Internet, mobile media, and packaging) directed at children.
- Bar or limit sugar drinks (and other unhealthy foods) on the government's own property, such as schools, office buildings, prisons, and parks.
- Require easily understood nutrition labels for foods high in added sugars (or sodium or saturated fat), as Ecuador and Chile are doing.
- Require warning labels on SSB containers and warning notices in advertising for SSBs.
- Bar sugar drinks on children's restaurant menus, and ensure safe, free water at all public places where children study and play.

The World Health Organization should:

- Hold trainings at the WHO regional offices for national health officials and provide technical assistance to help countries strengthen policies, including establish legal frameworks to discourage consumption of SSBs.
- Establish a global database of laws and implementing regulations that countries have adopted to discourage the consumption of SSBs, especially by youths, along with evidence of the effectiveness of such policies.
- Provide countries with toolkits for reducing the consumption of sugar drinks and provide technical assistance; the toolkits should include fact sheets on projected consumption levels, the health effects of sugar drinks, and model legislation.
- Hold consultations on the development of a treaty or non-binding international legal instrument to establish global standards on the labeling and marketing of sugar drinks and other unhealthy foods.
- Support research on the comparative effectiveness of legislative approaches to discourage youth consumption of SSBs in order to strengthen the evidence base for effective action.
- Set an example by removing sugar drinks from WHO facilities in Geneva and elsewhere—as well as at all other units of the United Nations—and not serving sugar drinks at meetings and conferences.

Beverage companies should:

- Acknowledge that heavy consumption of their full-calorie products contributes to obesity and other health problems.

- Stop all forms of marketing that are intended or likely to influence children under 12.
- Reduce container sizes (for instance, no container larger than 1.5 liters, with smaller containers reduced in size).
- Include a notice on containers disclosing adverse health effects.
- Reduce the calorie content of drinks to no more than 40 calories per 355 ml (12 oz.) by selling less-sweet drinks or using non-caloric sweeteners.
- Stop opposing governmental measures aimed at reducing the harm from sugar drinks.

Restaurants should:

- Drop sugar drinks from kids menus.
- List the calorie content next to each dish.
- Limit serving sizes of drinks to about 500 ml.

Civil society organizations should:

- Educate the public and policy makers about the health impact of SSBs and behavior of SSB marketers.
- Obtain funding from international development donors to conduct awareness campaigns, advocate legislation, and evaluate policy actions.
- Advocate for laws and policies at the local, national, and international levels, using education, legislation, litigation, and shareholder actions, to prevent health harm from SSBs.
- Advocate for the recognition of SSBs as a global-health and -development issue and discourage international financial institutions from subsidizing the SSB industry.
- Monitor the activities of industry and its compliance with voluntary commitments and with laws.
- Evaluate the impact of voluntary and legal measures.
- Discourage athletes, celebrities, and sports organizations from promoting SSBs.
- Create an international coalition of health, public interest, and research organizations to collect country-level data on public and private actions and advocate for strong international, national, and local actions to reduce the harm from unhealthy SSBs and foods and oppose the westernization of traditional diets.