

Progress made in addressing food marketing to children, but challenges remain

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The last six years have seen significant progress in efforts to curb the marketing of unhealthy food to children, with an increasing number of governments taking on the issue, but considerable challenges remain, a leading expert on the topic said today.

At the International Congress on Obesity in Stockholm, Tim Lobstein presented an analysis of the European policy landscape, undertaken as part of the European Commission's effort to gather evidence to support policy making on the marketing of foods to children.

For many years, public health experts have argued that the marketing of calorie-packed food and drinks to children contributes to the global obesity problem, but the issue has gained more traction over the last few years as concern over the scale of [childhood obesity](#) and has grown and as efforts to combat it have progressed.

"An increasing number of countries are trying to address this issue, with some introducing regulations addressing [television advertising](#) during children's programming or the use of familiar personalities or fictional characters to promote products during that television time slot. There is real progress, but the challenges are numerous," said Lobstein, director of policy at the International Association for the Study of Obesity, which coordinated the European Union PolMark study. "Firstly, most countries do not address advertising to children by the calorie content or other nutrient quality of the food product and marketing channels beyond broadcast advertising have been largely ignored. Secondly, our research

has shown that there's a certain amount of anarchy at the moment and concluded that the terms need to be set by government, not the industry itself, because although they appear to be willing, there's chaos within the details, with a lot of contradiction in what industry is offering."

Internationally, several countries are considering strong measures, Lobstein noted. Brazil is developing legislation on broadcast advertising, Thailand has legislation to limit the quantity of advertising to children, Korea and Malaysia have a ban on junk food marketing to children, while South Africa, Colombia and Chile have a draft law in waiting, he said.

In Europe, two-thirds of countries now have, or are proposing, statements on food marketing to children in their national health plans.

"That is a big shift," Lobstein said. "Six years ago, there were only about two or three countries out of the 50 or so in European region doing this, so this decade has seen a rapid increase in awareness by government policy makers, who are increasingly writing it into their strategies."

Also, the UK took a lead in 2006 by banning ads for specific types of food during children's viewing hours. This was considered a major step, Lobstein said, because it introduced a legal definition of junk food, using a formula based on the nutrient profile of food products.

In the United States, a federal interagency working group established last year is developing proposals for voluntary nutritional standards for food and drink marketed to children and adolescents under the age of 18. The final proposals are scheduled to be submitted in a report to the U.S. Congress by July. Lobstein also noted that U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama's childhood obesity initiative does not rule out the possibility of regulation if voluntary measures prove insufficient.

He said the passage of a resolution - without dissent - at the annual meeting of member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva in May is another mark of progress. The resolution urged countries to implement recommendations contained in a report on restricting food and drink marketing to children and instructed WHO to provide technical support. "A general resolution endorsing a set of recommendations doesn't look dramatic, but it consolidates the progress made so far. If they had tried to debate the recommendations one-by-one, they may have found countries unwilling to endorse them and that would have unravelled quite a lot of the work that has been done to get this far," Lobstein said.

One of the major challenges is that voluntary action has some impact, but not enough, Lobstein said. "Food companies are making pledges and showing that they are sticking to those, but the pledges have loopholes. They don't all stick to the same criteria around the definition of marketing, what age group of children and what foods are covered. Companies have been pushing the boundaries into children's social marketing networks, school playgrounds, text messaging to mobile phones and so on, undermining any likely parental controls. We need a system that supports, rather than hinders, the efforts of parents to prevent obesity in their children. You cannot expect the industry to reform itself when so much money would be lost," he said.

In a separate presentation at the conference, Brazilian researcher Fabio Gomes reported an analysis of advances and setbacks in his country's effort to address food marketing. The Brazilian government is proposing statutory regulation that would require health warnings to be included in advertisements for [food](#). Gomes said that challenges in Brazil include weak consumer criticism and the abandonment of early government proposals for a watershed for advertising to children. Also, while multinational companies have made pledges on the issue in the United States and in Europe, they have not made their pledges or self-regulation

rules effective in Brazil, he said. "We are in a deaf dialogue in Brazil," said Gomes, a nutritionist and senior analyst at the National Cancer Institute of Brazil.

Lobstein said it is less important whether measures are voluntary or statutory. What matters, he said, is that governments need to agree a clear set of targets that include cross-border marketing applied to products based nutrient profiling, a timeline and monitoring to ensure progress is being made.

Provided by International Association for the Study of Obesity

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