

Policymakers fall short on global agreement to reduce the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children

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Vivica Kraak, an assistant professor of food and nutrition policy, found that international entities have fallen short on agreements to restrict marketing of unhealthy foods to children and teens. Credit: Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

The current obesity epidemic is so grave that 2.7 billion people—nearly a third of the world's population—are estimated to be obese by 2025, making the branding and marketing of foods that are high in salt, sugar, and fat an especially dangerous proposition for consumers.

A Virginia Tech researcher has found that while small steps have been taken by the global food and beverage industry to reduce the targeted marketing of [unhealthy foods](#) and beverages to children and teens, comprehensive measures to keep them from falling under the influence of such marketing efforts have fallen short of a World Health Organization resolution to reduce obesity.

"Despite national governments having adopted a 2010 resolution to enact legislation to restrict the marketing of high-fat, sugary, and salty food and

beverage products to children and adolescents worldwide, no member state has yet implemented comprehensive legislation or enforced mandatory regulations to restrict the marketing of unhealthy branded food and beverage products to young people," said Vivica Kraak, an assistant professor in the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise in the Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Kraak was the lead author on a paper that detailed these findings in the [July 2016 issue](#) of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*.

Children have a biological preference for sweet and salty tastes and build lifelong relationships with brands, making them especially vulnerable to marketing techniques at a young age. Worldwide, approximately 42 million children younger than five years old and 155-200 million school-aged children are overweight or obese.

Kraak found that the WHO and other United Nations system agencies had provided leadership and technical guidance to national governments to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products from 2010 to the present.

However, progress achieved by global industries, national governments, private foundations, and civil society organizations was more varied and fell short of the WHO's expectations that governments would restrict unhealthy food and beverage marketing to help reduce children's future obesity risk and noncommunicable disease rates by 25 percent by 2025.

Global industry actors, including transnational food, beverage, and restaurant companies, have not yet implemented a comprehensive global pledge to engage in responsible advertising and marketing to

young people that covers all types of integrated marketing communications including: the use of brand-equity mascots and media characters on food packaging and at point-of-sale, celebrity endorsements, sponsorships, in-school food marketing, fundraising, and charitable donations.

Kraak conducted the policy evaluation with an international team of public health colleagues from England, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Mexico. The team examined the actions taken and progress achieved between 2010 and early 2016 by the WHO and other United Nations organizations to implement the WHO resolution to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products to young people worldwide.

"This study is an important benchmark at the five-year anniversary of a resolution to determine how well governments have protected young people worldwide from the harmful impacts of the aggressive marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products that lead to poor diet, factors which can significantly influence children's future health trajectory," said Kraak.

In 2016, a WHO report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity noted with concern that member states had failed to give significant attention to the WHO resolution of 2010 and recommended implementation to restrict young people's exposure to the power of marketing of unhealthy foods and develop nutrient profiling systems to identify and regulate such products.

"We offer concrete steps that various industry, government, and civil society actors can take to address the global obesity pandemic among [young people](#) by improving the [food](#) marketing environment," said Kraak.

Provided by Virginia Tech

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