

Healthy Food City Symposium

Co-creating urban food
solutions for future residents

Chengdu City, September 2023





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"The prevention of obesity is a universal challenge. There is more we need to do, and we need comprehensive strategies involving all stakeholders. Moving forward, we will work closely with relevant departments and make concerted efforts to meet children's needs for nutrition and health."

Tian Jianxin

Deputy Director General of the Department of Food Safety Standards, Risk Surveillance and Assessment of the National Health Commission, at the symposium.



"Let's work to make Chengdu, and cities across China, not just cities of food, but cities of healthy food for our children."

Amanda Bissex

UNICEF Deputy Representative to China, at the symposium

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Tian Jianxin, Deputy Director General, Department of Food Safety Standards, Risk Surveillance and Assessment, the National Health Commission

Li Ning, Director General, China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment

Han Junhua, Secretary General, Chinese Nutrition Society

Yang Xiaoguang, Deputy Secretary General, Chengdu Municipal People's Government

Amanda Bissex, UNICEF Deputy Representative to China

Chen Junshi, Member of Chinese Academy of Engineering

Roland Kupka, Regional Nutrition Advisor, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office

Hu Qingyuan and Zeng Xihang, Adolescent Representatives

Guo Xiaohui, Official of Food and Nutrition Division, Department of Food Safety Standards, Risk Surveillance and Assessment

Liang Dong, Deputy director of the Division I of Applied Nutrition, China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment

Fan Shuangfeng, Deputy Director of Chengdu Center for Disease Control and Prevention

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UNICEF: Junjie Lin, Jingjie Yang, Xinya Zhu and Xin Wang

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Sichuan Nutrition Society: Wenjing Wang

Authors: Fiona Watson and Chongjun Alan Bi, *UNICEF China*; Dong Liang, *CFSA*

Technical Reviewers:

UNICEF: Ali Shirazi, Alison Feeley, Amanda Bissex, Junjie Lin, Nan Geoffrey Li, Roland Kupka, Suying Chang and Xinya Zhu

China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment: Ning Li and Zhaoping Liu

China Nutrition Society: Junhua Han

Chengdu Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Min Feng, Shuangfeng Fan and Xiaohui Li

Photos: Yuyuan Ma

Design: Xia Sheng

Branding reviewers: Jingjie Yang, Li Liu, Andrew Brown



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01

Background

The progress in agricultural technology and the evolution of the food industry have led to increased abundance and accessibility of food. Nevertheless, they have also introduced fresh challenges, as children in urban settings confront a food crisis marked by the widespread availability, accessibility, and heavy promotion of unhealthy options. This alarming situation is contributing directly to the growing challenge of obesity among children. To address this critical concern and uphold children's right to nutrition, cities are being called upon to take decisive action. City mayors from across the world are getting together through entities such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact¹ and C40 Cities to unite in actions for better food systems and to combat climate change.

Cities in China too are turning their attention to improving food environments for children in response to the increase in child obesity. Many of these children will go on to live with obesity in adulthood, facing stigma, depression, poor school attainment², ill health and the prospect of earlier death. Health, social and economic systems are ill equipped to cope with the direct and indirect costs. The impact of overweight and obesity among children threatens the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.

The causes of the rapid rise in childhood obesity are complex, and the global consensus has shifted from an emphasis on individual level factors to an increasing recognition of the impact of food environments. UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2019³ highlights the challenges faced by children in urban settings, where the consumption of unhealthy, ultra-processed foods has become increasingly common and outdoor spaces to play are limited. The need to transform the food environment by bringing in robust policies nationwide and in cities is clear and urgent.

China has been extremely successful in reducing levels of child undernutrition (stunting and wasting) over the last 20 years. It is now demonstrating global leadership in addressing the challenge of child overweight and obesity. Cities, such as Chengdu and Shenzhen, are already taking action through urban planning and governance measures. They are generating and inspiring changes that will make healthy and sustainable eating a reality for all children. The Chengdu Healthy Food City Symposium builds on these foundations.

¹ <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org>

² UNICEF (2020). Nutrition, for Every Child: UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030. UNICEF. New York.

³ UNICEF (2019). The State of the World's Children 2019. Children, Food and Nutrition: Growing well in a changing world. UNICEF. New York.



1.1 Healthy City Symposium

UNICEF China Country Office together with the China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment and Chinese Nutrition Society, with support from Chengdu Municipality, convened the Healthy Food City Symposium on 14 September 2023. The symposium took place during the 14th Asian Congress of Nutrition as a supplementary event that harnessed the momentum generated by the congress but with a different intent. Rather than an academic focus, it brought together a diverse group of global and national experts to share experience and stimulate in-depth discussions on policy formulation and city authority actions related to food environments. The overall purpose of the symposium was to generate a city level agenda for improving food environments and preventing child overweight and obesity. **The specific objectives were:**

- To inspire political commitment at city and national level to develop robust policies, strategies and time-bound actions to improve food environments and prevent overweight and obesity among children.
- To share technical evidence, effective approaches and good practices nationally and in cities to improve food environments and prevent overweight and obesity among children.
- To develop and strengthen partnerships between cities and across the nation to improve food environments and prevent overweight and obesity among children.

This report describes six key highlights from the symposium:

- (1) Political commitment;
- (2) Multi-sectoral collaboration;
- (3) Monitoring systems;
- (4) Private sector engagement;
- (5) Marketing restrictions;
- (6) Youth and community support.

For each key highlight, examples are presented that were shared at the symposium of global experience and progress in cities in China. Recommendations for the way forward are presented at the end of the document.

Key Highlights



2.1

Political commitment, legislation and policies

Sustained political commitment is essential for introducing legislation and policies for improving city food environments and addressing overweight and obesity. While the Chinese government has introduced numerous policies and guidelines to encourage individuals to change their behaviours, the journey towards exploring more efficient ways to improve food environments is just beginning. As many of these changes are still voluntary, it will take time before the effectiveness can be demonstrated. There is clear evidence for the central role of political leadership and mandatory controls:

- **An inadequate food environment** is now widely recognised as the underlying cause of overweight and obesity and actions to improve the environment are becoming a priority on the political agenda of national and local governments worldwide.
- **Mandatory legislation and policies** have been shown to be much more effective than voluntary guidelines providing a level playing field for all. National and local governments are responsible for mandating policies.
- **Investment in resources** will follow when political commitment is strong and sustained.
- **Enforcement and monitoring** of policies can only be achieved through national and local authority mechanisms supported by strong political commitment.

There are now several examples of mayors leading successful actions to improve food environments globally (Box 1) and in China (Box 2).



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Box 1

Quezon City**Political commitment and policies for a healthier city**

Quezon City has signalled its commitment to improving food environments and reducing high levels of overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases by signing up to the global C40 Good Food Accelerator in 2019.

Quezon City aims to integrate health and nutrition into all aspects of policy development: urban planning, education and the economy. The City authorities have reconstituted the Quezon City Nutrition Committee, a multi-sectoral body dedicated to addressing nutrition-related challenges and providing strategic guidance to programmes. The Committee supports the introduction of evidence-based policies. These include the healthy food procurement policy, a commitment to ensure that no public funds are spent on unhealthy foods, banning unhealthy food and drink, and increasing the number of drinking fountains in schools, supporting urban farming and introducing calorie labelling for foods sold in fast food chains, restaurants, hotels, and other food outlets.

The result is a decline in overweight over the last 3 years. Other cities in the Philippines are now starting to follow the example of Quezon City.



© Quezon City Government

For further reference: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/building-food-and-nutrition-resilience-quezon-city-case-study-integrated-food-systems>

Box 2

China

Political leadership for improving city food and nutrition

The Chinese government has placed childhood overweight and obesity as a top priority within its Healthy China 2030 Strategy. In alignment with this goal, the central government has introduced the National Nutrition Plan 2017-2030, with a strong emphasis on school food safety, nutrition, and overall health. Three demonstration cities, Weihai, Enshi, and Ganzhou, have been selected as pilot areas. What began as a weight control programme has shifted in focus to weight management and monitoring. This transition has opened up opportunities for broader efforts to shape a supportive environment. This includes addressing factors such as school canteens and commercial restaurants, where menu labelling initiatives have been piloted. As part of the preparation for food standards, regulations, and legislation, the China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment has conducted a series of risk assessments. The assessments encompassed various aspects, including the evaluation of the intake of free sugars, sodium, and fat among Chinese residents. The insights gained from the assessments have played a pivotal role in informing the amendment of the General Principles for Nutritional Labelling of Pre-packaged Food (GB28050) (to be published soon). Notably, this amendment would include mandatory disclosure of sugar and saturated fat, which was not compulsory in the nutritional content information on packages previously.



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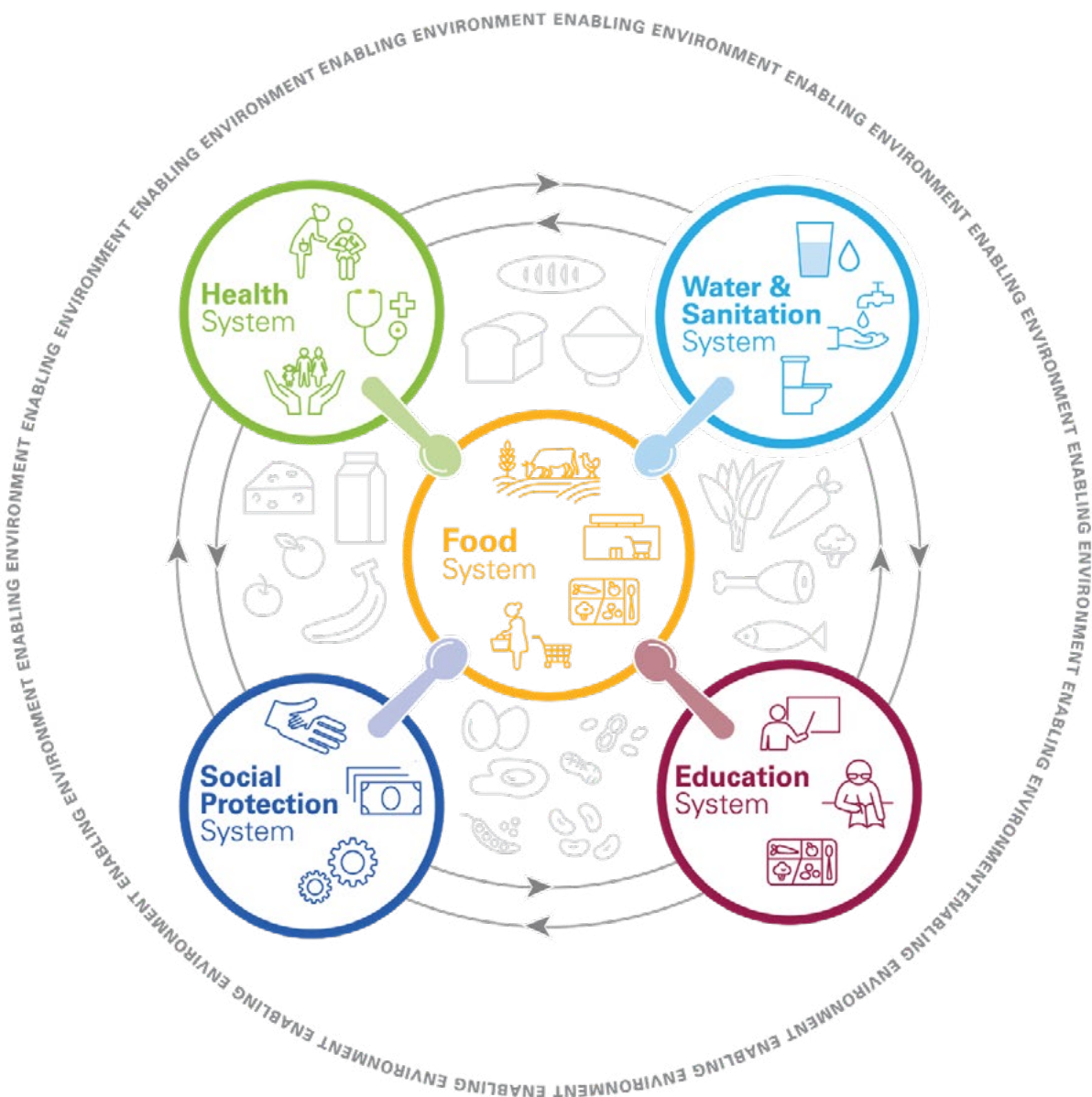
For further reference: <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/gwywj/201707/2155c7512dd145d3bcec88600604f2c6.shtml>



2.2

Multi-sectoral collaboration

Multiple responses to a multifaceted challenge:
A systems approach to nutrition



Source: UNICEF. Maternal and Child Nutrition UNICEF Strategy 2020-2030. UNICEF; New York; 2019

Overweight and obesity cannot be effectively addressed by the health sector alone. While the health sector has a vital role to play, particularly in terms of management of overweight, the engagement of multiple sectors is needed to prevent overweight by acting to improve food environments. Key sectors include food, health, education, urban planning, water and sanitation. Bringing these sectors together at national and city level is an important first step for tackling overweight.

- **Key sectors have responsibility** for different aspects of the food environment that are driving unhealthy diets and overweight.
- **Multi-sectoral committees with high level political leadership** bring together multiple stakeholders with a common purpose to improve food environments and address child overweight and obesity.
- **Multi-sectoral planning** must involve as many relevant sectors as possible so that there is ownership for the roadmap for action and support for measuring progress.

City authorities oversee multiple sectors and have the power to bring these sectors together to focus on improving food environments. There are growing number of examples of multi-sectoral action at city level that result in reductions in overweight among children globally (Box 3) and in China (Box 4).

Box 3

The Netherlands Multi-sectoral integration for healthier environments

The JOGG initiative in the Netherlands involves 212 municipalities aiming to make the environment healthier for children. It integrates health into all policy domains: economic development, education, social environment, sports and urban planning. The programme is rolled out at three levels, policy, professional and neighbourhood.

At a local level, 'worknets' are set up which include professionals from all domains who work on 6 essential areas; political support, public-private partnerships, shared ownership, connection between prevention and care, monitoring and communication. Examples of activities include:

- JOGG-teamfit who provide advice in sport and community centres, schools and parks
- More water taps in public areas
- Healthy school meals
- Legal instruments to create healthy food environments around schools

After 4 years, the JOGG approach has resulted in a reduction of 9% in overweight among children and adolescents and has been most successful in lower socio-economic areas. It is estimated to have added 16 more years of life and 19 more years of healthy life per 100,000 population per year.

For further reference: <https://jogg.nl/about-jogg>

Box 4

Chengdu City

Multi-sectoral action planning to address child obesity

Chengdu Municipal Government, with the support of UNICEF and under the guidance of the National Health Commission, is leading the action plan on the Prevention and Control of Childhood Obesity in the Urban Setting 2021 to 2025. A landscape analysis of Chengdu City was initially conducted to evaluate the multiple factors influencing childhood obesity and the food environment. Policies and interventions were mapped out and gaps identified. The findings were presented at a multi-sectoral workshop in 2021 which resulted in the development of a multi-sectoral action plan. The objectives of the action plan are:

- To establish Chengdu Municipal Government leadership and implementation mechanisms.
- To establish and improve the working mechanisms on infant feeding.
- To ensure children, youth and caregivers receive good education on food, food safety and healthy diets.
- To foster a social norm of promoting a healthy and adequate diet and healthy lifestyles
- To develop a multi-indicator monitoring and evaluation system for child obesity.

The activities and policy interventions under these objectives require the collaboration of many sectors. Promotion of nutrition in schools requires collaboration between the health and education sector, food retail and restaurant initiatives are part of the commercial sector, community based education is supported by the Women's Federation and proposed restrictions on outdoor advertising involves the marketing regulation sector.



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For further reference: <https://www.unicef.cn/en/reports/landscape-analysis-childhood-overweight-and-obesity-chengdu-china>



2.3

Monitoring systems

Governments and local authorities need to assess the current and changing status of food environments in order to plan ahead and invest resources. An evidence-based monitoring system allows governments and local authorities to track a range of indicators covering all aspects of the food environment that are fundamental for improving diets and lifestyles for prevention of overweight and obesity.

- **Assessing the food environment** provides an overall picture of the healthiness of the food environment for governments, public health advocacy groups and the media.
- **Identifying gaps in policy and legislation** relating to food environments informs national and local governments.
- **Tracking progress** over time supports identification of areas of the food environment where progress is either too slow, static or even deteriorating.

There are a few global examples of monitoring systems designed specifically to track the food environment (Box 5). China has a detailed the China Health and Nutrition Survey (Box 6), which can act as a solid foundation for a comprehensive food environment monitoring system.

Box 5

Australia Food environment dashboard

A national dashboard has been developed to assess food environments in Australia which was launched in 2021. The dashboard is divided into 11 areas representing all parts of the food environment: (1) Food composition, (2) Food labelling, (3) Food prices and affordability, (4) Food promotion, (5) Food in settings, (6) Food retail, (7) Supermarkets, (8) Fast food, (9) Food manufacturers, (10) Government policies, (11) Equity.

Indicators have been defined for each indicator based on the best available and up-to-date data. All indicators provide quantitative information and are coded as:

- Green = 'Promotes health';
- Amber = 'Needs further improvement to promote health';
- Red = 'Unhealthy'.

The dashboard is action orientated, providing practical recommendations for government, industry, academics, and those working in public health.

For further reference: <https://foodenvironmentdashboard.com.au/>

Box 6

China Health and Nutrition Survey

The China Health and Nutrition Survey was first conducted in 1989 and will have a 12th follow up in 2024. Some relevant indicators are collected including food consumption data. This shows that 74% of sugar consumed by children is from pre-packaged foods. In 2011, the survey was extended to include information on pre-packaged foods. The survey continues to evolve:

- To reflect dietary shifts in China;
- To strengthen and expand the food composition database to include more pre-packaged food, processed food, and restaurant dishes;
- To increase the collection of food environment indicators, and improve the comprehensiveness and accuracy of dietary assessment;
- To translate the findings of the survey and surveillance into policies and interventions and better promote nutrition and health of the Chinese population.

For further reference: https://www.chinanutri.cn/gzrw_132/10/



2.4

Private sector engagement

In China, sales of unhealthy processed food and drinks are on the rise with greater numbers of consumers buying these products from supermarkets, convenience stores and on-line. The private sector, including the food and beverage (F&B) industry, has a critical role to play in turning the tide on this trend by improving access to healthier foods while decreasing access to unhealthy foods. There are compelling reasons for F&B businesses to act:

- **Corporate social responsibilities** are being taken seriously worldwide and businesses are modifying practices to deliver healthier, environmentally sustainable food and drink to customers.
- **Government legislation** is being introduced to restrict the marketing and sale of unhealthy food and drink. Businesses are preparing for these changes so that they maintain a competitive advantage.
- **Investors** are becoming increasingly aware of the financial risks related to unhealthy diets and are changing their investment strategies to focus on healthy and sustainable investments.

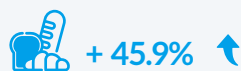
- **Health consciousness** is growing among customer who are looking for foods that reflect their lifestyle and concern for health and the planet.

The F&B retail industry has already started to reshape practices in urban areas to make healthier food more accessible. Global experience has shown that even small changes to pricing, promotion, placement and types of product can make a difference and increase sales of healthier food and drink (Box 7). These measures are being tested in China and guidance for the retail sector is planned (Box 8).

Box 7

London Reshaping urban retail for healthier purchases

Bestway is the largest independent wholesaler in the UK supplying 125,000 retailers and caterers in London. As part of a pilot intervention in one borough of London, Bestway created a Healthier Options range of food and drinks and made changes in their depot to pricing and promotion, availability, shelf labelling and merchandising. Volume wholesales of the Healthier Options range (excluding soft drinks) increased by 7,277 cases over the promotion period, reflecting an increase of 17.7% in volume of sales. Other key findings included significant increases in volume sales for:



Wholemeal bread



Fresh foods



Grocery



Frozen Foods



Sugar free confectionery

The results showed that simple changes in a retail setting can have a significant impact on customers' purchasing decisions and work best in combination. The pilot also demonstrated that retail businesses can benefit through increasing growth in overall sales.

For further reference: <https://neighbourhoodretailer.com/bestway-wholesale-launch-good-food-wholesale-initiative/>

Box 8

China

Working with retailers to promote healthier stores

As part of a broader regional initiative, UNICEF China Country Office has commissioned Chengdu CDC and Sichuan University, in collaboration with the Chengdu Retail Association, to join the Healthy Retail Food initiative. Freshippo (Chengdu) and Lawson (Chengdu) have agreed to pilot interventions within their stores in Chengdu to promote healthier foods in place of unhealthy foods. In-store modifications include:

- Labelling shelves as 'Healthier Options' where alternative healthier food or drink are placed;
- Remove unhealthy food from check out area;
- Increase proportion of healthy food in the stores;
- Remove in-store promotion of unhealthy food.



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In addition, UNICEF China Country Office has signed a MOU with the China Chain-store and Franchise Association (CCFA), which is a government owned industry platform working at the national level. The contract is for 2 years up until 2025. It will include development of guidance for the retail industry, a scalable piloting project of healthier retail environments and monitoring the results.

For further reference: <https://healthyfoodretail-eastasiapac.org/>



2.5

Marketing restrictions

Chinese children are exposed to the marketing of unhealthy food and drink through multiple channels and most of this marketing is for unhealthy products. UNICEF and the World Health Organisation (WHO) strongly recommends that Member States introduce robust marketing legislation and issued new guidance 'Taking action to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing: A child rights approach' in 2023. There are compelling reasons for governments to introduce legislation:

- **Marketing restrictions are successful** in reducing exposure to, purchase and consumption of unhealthy food.
- **It has been substantiated by real evidence that mandatory controls are effective** in reducing marketing of unhealthy foods.
- **Children have rights** to good health and nutrition, freedom from exploitation and protection from harmful practices. Governments and local authorities are bound to protect these rights that are all threatened by marketing of unhealthy food and drink.

While comprehensive marketing legislation is the realm of national governments, restrictions on marketing around schools, publicly managed billboards and transport systems can be put in place by city authorities. There are now several examples of cities introducing and enforcing legislation to control marketing of unhealthy food and drink (Box 9) and in China (Box 10).

Box 9

London

Marketing restrictions on public transport

Advertising restrictions on all food and drink high in fat, sugars and salt advertised on public transport were made by the Mayor of London in 2019. Controls were implemented across the Transport for London network (including buses, trains, underground, taxis). The introduction of the law was supported by 82% of Londoners who make 30 million journeys every day.

An evaluation study compared weekly household food purchases before and after introduction of the ban and found reductions of:

- 6.7% ↓ Energy (1001 kJ) - 59.9g ↓ Fat - 80.7g ↓ Sugar
 - 26.4g ↓ Saturated fat - 19.4% ↓ Energy from chocolate and confectionery (317.9 kJ)

The ban has been estimated as leading to 94,867 fewer cases of obesity, equivalent to a 4.8% decrease in cases, 2,857 fewer cases of diabetes, and 1,915 fewer cases of cardiovascular disease.

For further reference: <https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/research/places-communities/evaluation-of-the-removal-of-hfss-junk-food-advertising-in-public-transport-networks-on-junk-food-awareness-and-purchasing-in-london-natural-experiment-study-wsb-ws1-wp1/>

Box 10

Shenzhen

Warning labels on sugary drinks

Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Health Regulations became effective in 2021. Article 47 states that sellers of alcoholic beverages and carbonated drinks should set up standard health damage warning signs on their shelves or counters. Enforcement is through the Market Supervision and Management Department and failure to comply leads to a fine.

A survey of 6 categories of 232 different retail settings conducted in Shenzhen found that while warning signs were well displayed in health institutions and supermarkets, they were not well displayed in children's settings, food service establishments, vending machines or convenience stores. The survey also found that stores displaying warning labels experienced a decline in sugary drink sales and an increase in artificial sweetened drink sales. Additionally, youth and caregivers who noticed the labels were more likely to forgo purchasing sugary drinks themselves and to persuade their family members to abstain from consuming them.



For further reference: http://wjw.sz.gov.cn/xxgk/tzgg/content/post_8388783.html



2.6

Youth engagement and community support

Youth aged 15-24 years are specifically targeted by F&B companies for marketing of unhealthy food and drink. This is because this age group is becoming increasingly independent in their food choices, have some cash to spend and are vulnerable to advertising, particularly from celebrities and influencers whom they admire. This has led to increasing consumption of carbonated drinks, fast foods and snacks in this age group. While the emphasis in China has been on nutrition education, engaging youth themselves in developing solutions has major benefits.

- **Improved understanding of the influences** of the food environment and how this affects the behaviours of youth is vital for designing appropriate solutions.
- **Engagement of youth** in design and implementation of policies and programmes contributes to relevance and feasibility.
- **Innovative means of advocacy and communication** are needed for scaling up policies and programmes and youth are proficient at developing novel ways of communicating messages.

Youth are increasingly becoming involved in planning, implementing and advocating for improved food environments. There are many examples from countries all over the world and China is following this lead (Box 11).

Box 11

Beijing and Chengdu City Youth voice for action on food

A total of 60 youth from Beijing and Chengdu took part in two consultations on food environments in the week before the symposium and 1,300 more across the country expressed their opinions through an online survey. It was part of a regional 'Fix My Food' initiative to engage youth in understanding how their diets are influenced by the food environment around them. Participants were passionate in expressing their views and recommendations for action. Their ideas were captured in comic style in four posters. Two representatives from the group attended the symposium with the hopeful expectation that every child and youth can experience a healthy lifestyle supported by government and other stakeholders in society.

UNICEF is in a prime position to empower youth to advocate for a better world in which the promotion of healthy food is paramount, and the regulation of unhealthy food is rigorous. The next steps for engaging youth include:

For further reference: <https://www.unicef.org/eap/fix-my-food>



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- Establishing youth networks with a keen interest in enhancing city food environments and exploring collaborations with similar youth networks in other nations.
- Identifying and nurturing youth 'champions' who are deeply passionate about improving food environments and can lead their peers in pioneering advocacy initiatives.
- Identifying opportunities for youth to actively participate in policy discussions, leveraging their potential as influential advocates for healthier cities.

Way Forward

The symposium initiated a vital discussion on how cities can proactively address obesity-promoting environments for future generations, even before the introduction of national policies. This proactive approach not only benefits the cities sustainability and development but also serves as an exemplar for others. Cities willing to embark on this critical agenda should consider the following actions.



3.1

Take opportunities to interact with other cities.

Despite differences in context, cities can learn a lot through sharing experience of improving food environments. In depth understanding of strategies that have been adopted at city level and proven to be effective help others to develop their own strategic approach. First hand, practical experience can be shared through bilateral arrangements or through membership of global pacts such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. This Pact also provides a concrete working tool for cities through its Framework for Action listing 37 recommended actions, clustered in 6 categories, with specific indicators to monitor progress.



3.2

Promote multi-sectoral collaboration.

Promoting a food systems approach highlights the fact that multiple sectors need to be involved and provides a clear understanding about the risk factors and underlying systemic influences causing overweight and obesity. Establishing city level multi-sectoral collaboration mechanisms provides a platform for different sectors to combine their efforts with a common aim.



3.3

Establish a food environment monitoring system.

Tracking progress is key so that achievements can be properly recorded and gaps identified. Each city needs to identify available, reliable and relevant indicators that can be collected over time in order to track progress in improving food environments.



3.4

Encourage the private sector to participate.

The private sector has a vital role to play in ensuring that healthy foods are available, easily accessible, affordable and appealing. It is not only the F&B companies, but also companies involved in such areas as communications and marketing. Setting out the importance of the food environment and healthy diets for children will help to engage the private sector who are adept at designing creative strategies to modify their practices for healthier business.



3.5

Introduce marketing restrictions in city public areas.

There is mounting evidence for the effectiveness of marketing restrictions on unhealthy food. Cities have powers to control marketing in some public areas, such as billboards and public transport, and some cities have already been able to successfully introduce controls in these areas.



3.6

Bring the youth voice into policy discussions.

The youth of today will be the adults and parents of tomorrow. They have a vested interest in ensuring that food systems are able to provide enough accessible healthy food in the future. Giving them a voice in policy discussions not only allows them to share their everyday experience of the food system, but also gives them an opportunity to propose innovative solutions which may not yet have been considered by adult policy developers.





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