

The marketing of unhealthy food to children in Europe

A report of Phase 1 of the
'Children, obesity and associated avoidable chronic diseases' project

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This document is the summary of a full report on research carried out in 20 European countries from May to November 2004 on published literature on the extent and nature of marketing of foods high in high in fat, sugar or salt to children.

The full report is available upon request from the National Coordinators. It can also be downloaded from www.ehnheart.org

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Executive summary and recommendations

Increasing obesity, especially in children, is being noted with mounting concern throughout Europe. The International Obesity Task Force estimates that approximately 20% of school-age children in Europe are carrying excess body fat, with an increased risk of developing chronic disease. Of these overweight children, a quarter are obese, with a significant likelihood that some will have multiple risk factors for cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and other co-morbidities before or during early adulthood.

The “Children, obesity and associated avoidable chronic diseases” project involves national heart foundations in 20 different European countries (national coordinators) together with three other partner organisations (the British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group, the International Association of Consumer Food Organisations and the International Diabetes Federation – European Region) . The project is coordinated by the European Heart Network, and part-funded by the European Commission. The national coordinators have collected the bulk of the information for this report.

The project is taking place in three phases. Phase 1 involves mapping the policy terrain; Phase 2 will disseminate the findings of Phase 1; and Phase 3 will encourage organisations to develop a pan-European programme of action to address childhood obesity.

This report - covering Phase 1 of the project - focuses on the marketing of food to children, but it is acknowledged that changes to the way foods are marketed and otherwise promoted to children are only one way in which overweight and obesity in childhood needs to be tackled. Obesity in childhood is caused both by the over-consumption of certain foods and by insufficient physical activity, so efforts need to be made both to improve children’s diets and to raise their levels of physical activity. The promotion of healthier eating in childhood will involve a range of measures in a variety of settings, not just changing the ways foods are marketed to children. These measures will be considered in the later phases of this project.

Although the quantity and quality of information about food marketing to children varies between countries across Europe, a clear picture has emerged from this project, in line with results from other research.

- Most of the food marketed to children is regarded, by those concerned with public health, as ‘unhealthy’¹ food, i.e. food that is high in fat, particularly saturated fat, sugar or salt, and low in essential minerals, vitamins and other components important for a healthy diet. The extent of unhealthy food marketing to children varies from country to country. For example, this project found that estimates of the percentage of TV advertisements for food aimed at children that were for unhealthy foods ranged from 49% in Italy to nearly 100% in Denmark and the UK.
- A considerable amount of money is spent by companies marketing unhealthy foods to children, with the great majority spent on TV advertisements. In Greece, the total budget for children’s food marketing increased by 38% between 2002 and 2003, from €1.3

¹ There is an ongoing debate about whether a food can be described as ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’. Some contend that there is no such thing as healthy or unhealthy food, only healthy and unhealthy diets. This report assumes that some foods are more likely to contribute to unhealthy diets than others and for convenience these foods are described as ‘unhealthy’ foods throughout the report. An alternative term would be, for example, a food that is ‘high in fat, sugar or salt’ but besides being more cumbersome does not convey all that is conveyed by ‘unhealthy’. (See also Section 4.1 of this report.)

million to €1.8 million. In Sweden the cost of TV advertising for high-energy products shown mainly at the hours when children watch television amounted to SEK 238 million in 2003. In other countries no distinction is made between overall food marketing and food marketing to children, but the figures are impressive: in the UK £743 million was spent overall on food and drinks advertising in 2003, and some data show that the total amount spent on food marketing is increasing. In Germany, total food advertising represents 87% of television advertising spending. Advertising spending in the food industry as a whole in The Netherlands grew by 128% between 1994 and 2003. However, there are signs that the proportion of advertising budgets spent on TV may be declining slightly, with small but rising proportions being diverted into marketing in schools and via the Internet.

- In all countries a variety of 'creative' marketing strategies are used to promote foods to children. These include linking food products with children's heroes and cartoons, play, fun, action-adventure, humour, magic and fantasy.
- Spending on media other than TV – such as magazines, radio, cinema, mobile phones and outdoor advertising – is usually a small proportion of total food marketing budgets. However, along with TV, schools and the Internet, these media form part of a sophisticated and integrated mix of marketing techniques used by companies to sell their products.
- Schools represent a growing marketing channel for food advertisers in most European countries. Strategies include sponsoring events, linking food product purchasing to the provision of educational or sporting equipment often involving token collection schemes, and selling unhealthy food and drink products in vending machines.
- The Internet is also a new and growing medium for food advertisers. For example, in the UK in 2003, 13% of total spending on food, soft drinks and fast food advertising was via the Internet, making the Internet the second most important promotional channel after television. Food advertisers have discovered that the addictive quality of web-surfing is an advantage to them.
- Regulation of marketing to children varies considerably, with the majority of regulatory effort focusing on TV; in all 20 countries there is at least one statutory code on broadcast advertising broadly based on the Television Without Frontiers Directive. Sweden and Norway have tried to protect their children from TV advertisements by prohibiting them within their borders. However, their efforts are being undermined by advertisements on cable and satellite TV broadcast from other countries, and by other forms of marketing.
- One way in which the regulation of marketing to children varies between countries is in the way that children are defined. The definition of a 'child' ranges from less than 12 years of age in The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden to less than 21 years of age in Estonia.
- Most countries have an incoherent patchwork of legal and voluntary controls on broadcast and non-broadcast advertising, and on marketing in schools. The Internet, as a newer medium, is among the least regulated, with promotions on food company websites virtually unregulated. The majority of countries recognise the need to protect children from advertising and marketing in general, but very few have specific rules focusing on food marketing to children.
- Food and media industries throughout Europe tend to vigorously defend their commercial interests, attempting to weaken tough regulations – where they exist – and resisting efforts to introduce or strengthen measures designed to protect children from marketing.

- Those concerned with children’s health and well-being – health, consumer and other citizens’ organisations – tend to argue that ‘unhealthy’ food marketing to children is one of the significant contributors to, among other things, childhood obesity. Protecting children from this influence is therefore often proposed as a key measure in any child health programme.
- Governments have reacted differently to these conflicting pressures. Norway and Sweden have opted for a ban on TV advertisements to children, but most other governments have introduced a variety of incomplete and sometimes overlapping educational and promotional initiatives, alongside nutrition guidance.
- Independent organisations also operate a range of similar initiatives, sometimes in partnership with government and/or industry. Some are designed specifically to counter the negative effects of the marketing of ‘unhealthy’ food to children, but many are not. The few media literacy projects that exist tend to be funded by media industries and other commercial companies, including toy and food manufacturers.

Despite the lack of agreement over what should be done about ‘unhealthy’ food marketing to children, there are some apparent areas of consensus, particularly concerning the importance of education. Moreover, all parties acknowledge that childhood obesity has many causes, so a sophisticated programme of measures will be needed, including promoting physical activity as well as changing diets. However, despite agreement in principle, in practice no countries (except Finland and Norway) have introduced comprehensive policies designed to ensure that all children have:

- education and practical skills provided in schools that will encourage and enable them to eat a healthy diet, and equip them to deal effectively with conflicting messages in a multi-media world; and
- healthy food provided for them in schools, as a result of high quality standards for food in schools, whether provided as part of a meal or from vending machines or other outlets.

The Treaty of the European Union provides a legal basis allowing inclusion of health protection in European policies. In theory, there should be no difficulty in extending these principles to ensure that the health of all children in Europe – not just some – is adequately protected, including by prohibiting ‘unhealthy’ food marketing. The experience in Norway and Sweden – where a ban on TV advertisements to children has been undermined by broadcasting from outside their border and by marketing in other media – demonstrates why a Europe-wide approach is necessary. Thus:

- **The TV Without Frontiers Directive should be amended to prohibit TV advertising of ‘unhealthy’ food to children, thereby protecting the existing legislation in Norway and Sweden and extending this protection to the rest of Europe’s children.**
- **Additional measures should be introduced to protect children from all other forms of ‘unhealthy’ food marketing, including through schools and the Internet (where it is increasing), and through any other broadcast and non-broadcast media (even though these are currently minor outlets, compared to TV).**

The national coordinators for this project noted that there is no commonly agreed definition for an ‘unhealthy’ food or even a food that is ‘high in fat, sugar or salt’. Some countries (such as the UK and France) are developing methods of nutrient profiling so that working definitions of ‘unhealthy’ (or ‘foods high in fat, sugar or salt’) and ‘healthy’ foods can be agreed. Any future plans to protect children throughout Europe from the marketing of ‘unhealthy’ foods will need a common EU definition of ‘unhealthy’ food. Therefore:

- **A common EU definition of an unhealthy food needs to be agreed.**

Development of a common definition is in any event necessary in view of the current development of EU legislation on nutrition and health claims and a forthcoming review of the EU's Nutrition Labelling Directive.

In most instances the coordinators had difficulty in collecting information relevant to this report, particularly information about the type and amount of food marketing to children in their country. Relevant data could – in many cases – only be found with much difficulty and was often buried within reports written for other purposes. Therefore in order to inform policy making:

- **Effective structures and procedures should be established to monitor the nature and extent of food marketing to children and its regulation throughout Europe.**

Comprehensive strategies to combat obesity in children need to address all the causes of obesity, including measures to encourage children to be more physically active. While more evidence about the effectiveness of different policies – both in isolation and in combination – would undoubtedly be helpful, there is general agreement that action to address obesity in children is a matter of urgency.

This report gathers together wide-ranging information on the extent and nature of food marketing to children, collected by national co-coordinators in 20 countries. This information demonstrates that children are exposed to the marketing of 'unhealthy' food on a massive scale and stresses the need to protect children from such marketing as an important measure to address one critical influence on childhood obesity.

1. Introduction

Increasing obesity, especially in children, is being noted with mounting concern throughout Europe. The aim of the 'Children, obesity and associated avoidable chronic diseases' project – a project coordinated by the European Heart Network, and part-funded by the European Commission – is to contribute to addressing the obesity epidemic and associated avoidable chronic diseases in European children. The project has 24 partners and involves 20 European countries.

The International Obesity Task Force estimates that approximately 20% of school-age children in Europe are carrying excess body fat, with an increased risk of developing chronic disease. Of these overweight children, one quarter are obese, with a significant likelihood that some will have multiple risk factors for cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and other co-morbidities before or during early adulthood.¹

The objectives of the 'Children, obesity and avoidable chronic diseases' project are to:

- Measure and analyse food marketing to children and young people, building on earlier surveys. The project will focus on the extent and nature of marketing of 'unhealthy' foods, such as foods high in fat, sugar or salt, through various media and in different settings, as well as on trends in marketing strategies.

- Consider policy options to address obesity in children by reviewing current options such as: legislation and self-regulation of food marketing; action designed to compensate for any adverse effects of the marketing of food to children, including media literacy programmes; marketing alternative 'healthier' products; and initiatives to promote physical activity.
- Complement activities and approaches at national level and stimulate concerted action among concerned organisations. A proposal for a programme of pan-European action addressing childhood obesity will be developed.

The project comprises three phases. Phase 1 involves mapping the policy terrain; Phase 2 will disseminate the findings of Phase 1; and Phase 3 will encourage organisations to develop a pan-European programme of action to address childhood obesity.

This report – covering Phase 1 of the project – focuses on the marketing of food to children. Although marketing consists of the four components 'promotion', 'product', 'price' and 'place', the report concentrates specifically on the promotion aspect.

It is acknowledged that changes to the way foods are marketed and otherwise promoted to children are only one way in which overweight and obesity in childhood needs to be tackled. Obesity in childhood is caused by both the over-consumption of certain foods and insufficient physical activity, so efforts need to be made both to improve children's diets and to raise their levels of physical activity. The promotion of healthier eating in childhood will involve a range of measures in a variety of settings: not just changing the ways foods are marketed to children. These measures will be considered in the later phases of this project.

Phase 1 took place during the initial twelve months of the thirty-two month long project, starting in March 2004. The aims of Phase 1 were to:

- provide a context for the project by reviewing existing international evidence on the nature and extent of food marketing to children and the scope of relevant regulations.
- collect and analyse data from the 20 European countries participating in the project about:
 - the nature and extent of commercial marketing to children of foods high in fat, sugar or salt, and trends in marketing strategies;
 - the nature and extent of the regulation of food marketing to children;
 - attitudes towards food marketing to children amongst the various interested parties;
 - the nature and extent of counterbalancing measures, i.e. activities which may compensate for any negative impact of food marketing to children
- draw conclusions and make recommendations about food marketing to children across Europe.

2. Research methods

In the first instance a review of the international literature on the nature and extent of the marketing of food to children, its effects on children's diets and its regulation was carried out. This review focused on reviews of the literature rather than individual studies.

However, the main aim of Phase 1 of this project was the collection and analysis of national level information in 20 European countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

The information was collected by the national coordinators for the project using a specially designed questionnaire. Development of the questionnaire began in March 2004, and a draft was discussed at a project workshop with coordinators in April 2004. Following revisions, the final version was agreed and distributed in May 2004, accompanied by guidelines and a glossary to encourage standardised responses.

To complete the questionnaire coordinators had to use a variety of methods, including searching electronic databases and the World Wide Web, to find relevant reviews, individual studies, and reports of projects. Only material published since 1990 was included, and information was obtained from a variety of sources. Projects reviewed for the report had to be ongoing at the end of 2004.

Information was collected from May to September 2004. Following a presentation of initial findings at a workshop in October, a process of data clarification was undertaken to obtain confirmation or further details about information supplied. Thematic analysis was undertaken from September to December 2004.

In most instances the coordinators had difficulty in collecting relevant information, particularly in relation to the type and amount of food marketing to children in their country. Relevant data could only be found by digging deeply into a variety of sources, as the information was often buried within reports written for other purposes.

3. Food marketing to children: the European and global context

It is clear from the review of the international literature that, in general, the commercial marketing to children of food and drink is dominated by unhealthy products. Manufacturers of these foods are increasingly using integrated and sophisticated marketing strategies to promote their products directly and indirectly to children.

The only relevant international surveys of the nature and extent of television advertising aimed at children were carried out in 1996 and 1999 by Consumers International. The European countries covered were: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom,² Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.³ These surveys found that in virtually all countries, food advertising comprised the largest category of advertised products during programmes for children, with between one (Sweden) and eight (France) advertisements an hour. The foods advertised were generally confectionery, pre-sweetened cereals, savoury snacks or soft drinks, with up to 95% of food advertisements on television being for products high in fat, sugar or salt.

Whilst television continues to be used as a powerful food marketing method and in-school marketing is increasingly exploited, many other non-traditional marketing strategies are becoming more prominent. One of the fastest growing ways to market food to children is via the Internet, which is also one of the least regulated advertising channels. It is becoming common for food companies to use an integrated marketing mix of traditional and non-traditional techniques when targeting children.

There are several reviews of the effects of food marketing on children's diets. The most important of these – because it used systematic methods – is the Hastings review, commissioned by the UK Food Standards Agency and published in 2003.⁴ The review concluded that food promotion does affect children's food preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption at both a brand level (e.g. which chocolate bar) and category level (e.g. confectionery versus fruit).

A 2002 World Health Organization (WHO) review noted that via 'pester power', children have a major influence over parental buying decisions and children have therefore become 'market makers' for global companies. The review also argues that the younger generation is targeted in order to encourage a culture of regular and frequent soft drink and fast food consumption and to promote habits that will persist in adulthood.⁵

The most important review of the regulation of food marketing to children is a review commissioned by the WHO and published in 2004.⁶ It establishes that there are clear differences in the nature, scope and enforcement of regulations between countries and identifies significant gaps in the global regulatory environment. For instance, existing regulations tend not to recognise food as a category in need of special consideration from a public health standpoint. Thus regulations rarely aim to minimise consumption of 'unhealthy' foods.

4. Results

4.1 Types of foods high in fat, sugar or salt, commonly consumed by children

Given that the focus of this project is the marketing of foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt to children, national coordinators were asked to provide information about the types of foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt that are commonly consumed by children in their country. Most used government reports of nutritional surveys for this information. Table 1 provides a summary of the foods reported. The national coordinators identified a number of common food products that were high in fat, sugar or salt and commonly consumed by children – i.e. savoury snacks, confectionery, cakes and biscuits, fried foods, sugary drinks and breakfast cereals.

Table 1 Foods high in fat, sugar or salt commonly consumed by children

Food type	Number of countries (n=17)
Potato crisps/chips	17
Chocolate/confectionery	17
Cakes/biscuits/croissants etc.	15
Fast food (e.g. burgers, sausages, hot dogs etc.)	13
Sugary carbonated drinks	13
Savoury snacks (e.g. nuts, pretzels, popcorn)	13
Sugar or chocolate coated breakfast cereals	11
Full fat milk/flavoured milks	7
Ice cream	7
Sugary/high fat yoghurt products	6
Sweetened desserts	5
Chocolate spread/jams etc.	5
Margarine/butter/oils	4
Meat/meat products	3
Other (dressings, full fat cheese, pre-prepared meals, canned fish, pizza, high salt mineral water)	11

However, the coordinators noted that there is no commonly agreed definition for a food that is high in fat, salt or sugar. Some countries (such as the UK and France) are developing methods of nutrient profiling so that working definitions of 'unhealthy' foods (or foods high in fat, sugar or salt) and 'healthy' foods can be agreed.

Any strategy to protect children throughout Europe from the marketing of 'unhealthy' foods will require a common EU definition of 'unhealthy' food.

4.2 Type and amount of food marketing to children

Comparable information on the type and amount of food marketing to children proved particularly difficult to gather. Very little is publicly accessible and such statistics as are available are expensive to purchase from market research companies. Often data relating specifically to children are not produced, so most national coordinators were unable to report this information. However, from the information available it is clear that food advertisements during children's TV overwhelmingly promote 'unhealthy' foods, with very little promotion of fruit and vegetables and other 'healthy' foods.

The extent of unhealthy food marketing to children varies from country to country. For example this project found that estimates of the percentage of TV advertisements for food aimed at children that were for unhealthy foods ranged from 49% in Italy to nearly 100% in Denmark and the UK.

For some countries the project coordinators were able to find information on spending on food advertising in general. In the UK £743 million was spent on food and drinks advertising in 2003, and some data show that the total amount spent on food marketing is increasing. In Germany, total food advertising represents 87% of television advertising spending. In The Netherlands advertising spending by the food industry as a whole grew by 128% between 1994 and 2003. In Greece, specific figures regarding budgets for children were found showing that the total budget for children's food marketing increased by 38% between 2002

and 2003, from €1.3 million to €1.8 million. In Sweden in 2003, the cost of TV advertising for high-energy products such as chocolate, breakfast cereals (predominantly sweet cereals), ice-cream, soft drinks, confectionery and fast food amounted to SEK 25 million for advertising from 07.00-08.00 and SEK 213 million for advertising from 17.00-20.00. These are the main hours when children are assumed to watch television.

Creative strategies used by food advertisers when targeting children include close links with children's culture, such as references to movies and their characters, and using child-related appeals to play, fun, action-adventure, humour and magic or fantasy. Many advertisements make use of cartoon or celebrity characters.

Recent UK statistics suggest that spending on advertising in the food sector may be increasing, though the proportion spent on TV advertisements may be declining. Nonetheless, the vast majority of food promotion is through television, with food promotion through radio, magazines and cinemas taking a low and possibly declining proportion of advertising spending in the countries which reported data.

Schools, on the other hand, represent a growing marketing channel for food advertisers in European countries. Strategies include sponsoring events, linking food product purchasing to the provision of educational or sporting equipment often involving token collection schemes, and selling unhealthy food and drink products in vending machines. In Ireland, for example, food companies sponsor a wide range of sporting activities and competitions in schools, as well as providing branded educational materials about particular products.

The Internet is also a new and growing medium for food advertisers, although very little data on Internet advertising spending is reported. Creative strategies include cartoon-style games and competitions, links to food company websites, and educational content which appeals to schools. The addictive quality of web-surfing is an advantage to advertisers.

Although the general picture is clear and builds on earlier research (see Section 3), the evidence on the type and amount of food advertising to children could be strengthened, both within and between countries. A recent UK review makes a similar recommendation, adding that a consistent approach is needed, since existing studies are hard to compare because of differing focuses and methods.⁷

4.3 Regulation of food marketing to children

The regulation of food marketing to children across Europe is characterised by inconsistency, both within and between countries. Approaches to protecting children vary from the very tough (e.g. the ban on TV advertisements targeting children under 12 in Norway and Sweden) to the non-existent (e.g. the absence of controls on company websites in most countries). While the majority of countries recognise the need to protect children from advertising and marketing in general, only six countries have specific rules on food marketing (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Spain and the UK). Furthermore, broadcast advertising – particularly TV – tends to be more heavily regulated than non-broadcast advertising. Although the Internet is very popular with children, paid-for Internet advertising is not well regulated.

There are also many more ethically-based guidelines and far fewer specific restrictions on the timing, content and form of marketing campaigns targeted at children. The Slovenian code on broadcast advertising, for example, is not atypical in stating: "Media should be aware of their moral and ethical responsibility concerning advertising to vulnerable groups, like minors", but within Slovenia there are frequent discussions about the dangers of food marketing to children.

Non-traditional forms of advertising targeted at children such as marketing in schools, sponsorship, Internet-based techniques and sales promotions are less regulated than television advertising to children. Belgium, Hungary, Iceland, and Portugal, for instance, have no voluntary or statutory codes covering advertising on the Internet.

One other way in which the regulation of marketing to children varies between countries is the way that children are defined. The definition of a 'child' ranges from less than 12 years of age in The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden to less than 21 years of age in Estonia.

Regulation of marketing techniques therefore lacks a comprehensive approach anywhere in Europe. Companies devise their marketing strategies as an integrated and sophisticated mix of media, while countries tend to regulate each medium separately and with greater or lesser stringency. In addition, the regulations, in whatever form, apply to each advertisement in isolation and to the advertising techniques (such as using cartoons, or harnessing 'pester power'). The effect on children's diets of food marketing as a whole has not yet been considered in any of the regulatory approaches, even the most recent. Thus, apart from the TV advertising bans in Norway and Sweden, there have been no attempts to control the type of food which is advertised, or the frequency or volume of advertising of particular types of food.

4.4 Attitudes towards food marketing to children

The attitudes of governments are shaped by many bodies that recommend a variety of courses of action on the issue of food marketing to children. Health, consumer and other citizen groups advocate protecting children from food marketing in the interests of public health. The food and advertising industries defend their right to promote their products, resist proposed restrictions, and lobby governments about the possible harmful effects of such restrictions on trade and commerce. Governments' responses to these conflicting pressures have varied from tough regulations – as in Sweden, for example – to a more 'laissez-faire' approach in the majority of countries.

In some countries, such as Germany, Spain and the UK, governments are trying to persuade the food and advertising industry voluntarily to restrict their activities, for example by 'responsible' self-regulation and by challenging them to introduce social marketing techniques to promote healthier food. Governments in other countries are focusing on restricting food marketing in schools, for example Finland, where the influence of marketing in schools is perceived as a key area of concern, and Greece, where a lack of agreed definitions for 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' foods is inhibiting efforts to remove unhealthy food products from schools.

Where countries have already banned food marketing to children on TV, governments are being called on to take action in other areas, e.g. advocating bans on cinema advertising in Norway, and calling for an international ban on TV advertising to children in Sweden.

The attitudes of the food and media industries reflect, of course, their commercial aims. They oppose plans to ban food marketing to children, argue for its removal where a ban is in place, and oppose tightening of existing restrictions. Industry arguments that are commonly made in a number of countries include the following:

- There is a lack of scientific evidence for food marketing to children causing obesity.
- Many societal factors are responsible for obesity – it is not reasonable to blame the food or media industry.

- Industry self-regulation is more effective than statutory restrictions.
- There is a lack of scientific evidence for the effectiveness of banning food marketing to children on TV.
- Helping children to understand advertising is better than banning it.
- 'Healthier' food ranges are expanding.

Health and consumer organisations are happy to acknowledge that obesity has many causes. The Danish Nutrition Council, for example, mentions restricting unhealthy food advertising to children as only one element of a broader obesity prevention strategy. However, food marketing to children, though not the only factor, is seen as important, and health and consumer organisations are predominantly in favour of either banning or further restricting the marketing to children of foods high in fat, sugar or salt. Parents, teachers, and other groups concerned with child welfare endorse these calls for bans or restrictions, including in schools. Indeed some regard this as a moral as well as a health issue, with a university hospital in Belgium, for instance, describing sweet drink vending machines in schools as morally unacceptable.

Other measures suggested by public interest groups include:

- regulating school food promotion, including unhealthy food in vending machines;
- providing more effective nutrition education throughout the school curriculum;
- providing media literacy education linked to nutrition education;
- regulating food promotion via other media, e.g. the Internet;
- restricting promotions at point of sale;
- taxing unhealthy foods;
- providing appropriate nutrition labelling;
- developing a standardised nutrient profiling scheme;
- offering effective nutrition information to parents;
- introducing tougher EU-wide and global food marketing regulations; and
- undertaking further research and monitoring.

Interestingly, there are some broadly common themes shared by commercial interests and those concerned with public health, e.g. the importance of education. However, there are no signs of a convergence of views on what should be done about marketing 'unhealthy' food to children.

4.5 Counterbalancing measures

This section of the report summarises measures that may be broadly interpreted as balancing out the effects of 'unhealthy' food marketing in some way. Counterbalancing measures are hard to define, since very few programmes or projects are introduced specifically for this reason; more often the initiatives aim to improve children's health and, more recently, tackle obesity. Counterbalancing measures have been categorised as fruit and vegetable promotion, general educational measures focusing on food and health, media literacy programmes, and physical activity programmes. The media literacy programmes are of particular interest since they attempt to provide children with the knowledge and skills to interpret critically the messages in advertising. The programmes and projects that are described in this section were ongoing at the end of 2004 but may have ceased operation since. In very few instances have the projects been evaluated.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetable promotion schemes are reported in most countries, from Austria to Spain and from Estonia to the Czech Republic. Many of these schemes advocate the consumption of at least five portions of fruit or vegetables a day. Such 'Five a day' schemes are mostly government funded or occasionally jointly funded with health and public interest groups, and/or with parts of the food industry. Sometimes these groups fund separate projects.

It is very common for fruit and vegetable promotion schemes to work in schools, offering educational programmes, information and materials, tasting sessions and free or low cost fresh fruit and vegetables. Media strategies, using traditional promotional techniques on TV and radio, and working through videos and websites are also often used.

General educational projects and materials focusing on food and health

Most countries have general educational projects and materials. Government projects tend to be school based, and focus either on specific teaching programmes or take a 'whole school' approach to health or nutrition standards within the school environment. Education projects run by other organisations may be set in schools, or be based on events or competitions. Food companies sometimes collaborate with health organisations in such projects. For example, in Hungary Nestle worked with the Association of Hungarian Dieticians to produce materials for schools.

Media literacy projects

Media literacy projects have been heralded as one way of counterbalancing the effect of promoting 'unhealthy' food to children. The aim of such programmes is to raise the critical awareness and understanding of children about advertising or, more unusually, focus on new media, such as the Internet, as in Iceland. However, only two countries, the UK and The Netherlands, reported specifically constructed programmes funded by a mixture of industry, advertising and media bodies and government. Other initiatives, mentioned by a few countries, tended to be more local in nature, and run by consumer or campaign groups.

Physical activity programmes

Most countries reported a variety of measures to promote physical activity – including projects run by or sponsored by food companies. From the companies' perspective, such projects can boost their public image and deflect attention away from the impact of their marketing activities that promote 'unhealthy' food.

Although all these measures have been grouped together as 'counterbalancing', in some way, the effects of 'unhealthy' food marketing to children, in no country have they been conceived of or implemented as an integrated programme. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they do not operate as such, and there are many gaps and overlaps.

5. Conclusions

The significant increase of obesity in children in the European Union is of major concern to all Member States. It is imperative that comprehensive strategies be put in place to combat this increase in obesity and that measures be taken as a matter of urgency.

One factor which is known to have an impact on children's consumption patterns is the marketing of unhealthy food to them, but there is a lack of agreement amongst stakeholders over what should be done.

It is clear that food manufacturers are increasingly using integrated and sophisticated marketing strategies to promote their products directly and indirectly to children. It is also clear from this report, as well as from other international reports and surveys, that globally the commercial marketing to children of food and drink is dominated by unhealthy products.

Whilst television continues to be used as a powerful tool for food marketing, and in-school marketing is increasingly exploited, many other non-traditional marketing techniques are becoming more prominent. One of the fastest growing ways to market food to children is via the Internet.

Regulation of marketing to children varies considerably, with the majority of regulatory efforts focusing on TV. Sweden and Norway have tried to protect their children from TV advertisements by prohibiting them within their borders. However, their efforts are being undermined by advertisements on cable and satellite TV broadcast from other countries, and by other forms of marketing.

Most countries have an incoherent patchwork of legal and voluntary controls on broadcast and non-broadcast advertising, and on marketing in schools. The Internet is among the least regulated, with food company websites given virtually free reign.

It is clear that national regulation of marketing of unhealthy food needs to be complemented by European and even global strategies, because marketing is international in its strategies and reach.

Comprehensive strategies to combat obesity in children need to address all the causes of obesity, including measures to encourage children to be more physically active. This report focuses on the marketing of food to children.

All the partners involved in this project have been impressed by the extent of the marketing to children of unhealthy food. They are adamant that children are a special group of the population and, therefore, need special protection against commercial communications. Given the concerns about the increase in obesity in children and the consequent increased risk of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases, which led to the development of this project, the findings presented in this report lead to the following recommendations:

- **TV advertising of unhealthy food to children should be prohibited and, as this can only be done effectively at European level, the Television Without Frontiers Directive should be amended accordingly, thereby protecting the existing legislation in Norway and Sweden and extending this protection to the rest of Europe's children.**

Legal bases in European treaties already exist to allow inclusion of health protection in European policies. In theory, there should be no difficulty in prohibiting the marketing of unhealthy food to children to ensure that the health of all children in Europe is adequately

protected. The experience in Norway and Sweden – where a ban on TV advertisements aimed at children has been undermined by broadcasting from outside their borders, and by marketing in other media – demonstrates why a Europe-wide approach is necessary.

- Additional measures should be introduced to protect children from all other forms of 'unhealthy' food marketing, including through schools and the Internet and through any other broadcast and non-broadcast media.

The national coordinators for this project noted that there is no commonly agreed definition for an 'unhealthy' food or even a food that is 'high in fat, sugar or salt'. Any future plans to protect children throughout Europe from the marketing of 'unhealthy' foods will need a common EU definition of an 'unhealthy' food. Therefore:

- A common EU definition of an 'unhealthy' food needs to be agreed.

In most instances the coordinators had difficulty in collecting information relevant to this report, particularly information about the type and amount of food marketing to children in their country. In many cases relevant data was buried within reports written for other purposes. Therefore, in order to inform policy making:

- Effective structures and procedures should be established to monitor the nature and extent of food marketing to children and its regulation throughout Europe.

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