

Taxes on sweetened drinks: WHO explains how to make them an effective health measure



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Taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) can help countries fight noncommunicable diseases and make people healthier – but this measure can be more effective if taxes are developed in collaboration between health and finance authorities.

This is one of the findings from the new WHO report “Sugar-sweetened beverage taxes in the WHO European Region”, which examines the experience of the 10 Member States who were first in the Region to introduce the measure.

“Taxation is a cost-effective policy that can improve health at national level. By introducing taxes on sugary drinks, countries can reduce consumption levels of these beverages and lower the associated risks of overweight and obesity, diabetes and other associated diseases,” said Dr Kremlin Wickramasinghe, Acting Head of the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases and one of the authors of the new report.

“However, today SSB taxation is underused in the WHO European Region – only 19% of countries have adopted the measure.”

The WHO report focuses on the experiences of Belgium, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Monaco, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Only those 10 of 53 countries of the WHO European Region have implemented SSB taxes on a national level.

The report’s findings are aligned with a recent WHO study published in the *European Journal of Public Health* and highlight the flexibility of SSB taxation practices and the opportunities they give to decision-makers.

The reviewed practices show that SSB taxes were always levied on

industry and not on consumers. But the design and specifics of the tax instrument differed by country.

Some Member States chose to focus on the economic effects of the SSB taxes, others explained the adoption explicitly as a health measure.

The design of taxes was also diverse. Hungary, Latvia and the United Kingdom, for example, introduced differential excise rates with thresholds based on the sugar content of beverages.

There are many different patterns of SSB tax used across the Region and the WHO report highlights some tips that can help decision-makers to turn taxes into an effective health measure:

“The aim of the WHO study was to inform decision-makers and support the effective implementation of SSB taxation across our Region,” added Dr Wickramasinghe. “WHO-recommended policy actions lead to longer lives and better well-being in every country of the WHO European Region.”

The WHO European Programme of Work 2020–2025 aims to reduce health inequities, empowering countries to introduce effective measures to improve the health of people across the Region.

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