GLOBAL DAIRY PLATFORM

Perspective Paper

Reducing Sugar Without Sacrificing Nutrition: A Case for Policy Coherence

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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- The World Health Organization's *Global Report on the Use of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Taxes 2025* reinforces sugar reduction through taxation as a public health priority, while emphasizing that fiscal measures must be embedded within broader, food-based and whole-diet strategies to be effective.
- Experience from saturated fat policy shows that nutrient-centric approaches can fall short when reduction targets are not paired with clear, health-promoting replacement pathways, limiting improvements in diet quality and health outcomes.
- Achieving meaningful health gains from sugar reduction will require policy coherence across nutrition and food system frameworks, as well as transparent engagement with the food and beverage industry to allow for responsible innovation that keeps nutrition at the forefront.

In early 2026, the World Health Organization (WHO) released its ***Global Report on the Use of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Taxes 2025***, designed to support governments in designing, implementing, and strengthening policies that reduce the consumption of beverages that are primary sources of free sugars.[1] The WHO defines **free sugars** as those that are added to foods and beverages by the manufacturer, cook, or consumer, as well as ones that are naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices, and fruit juice concentrate.[2]

Drawing on global data, the report evaluates the prevalence, design, and effectiveness of excise taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), positioning fiscal measures as one tool to improve population diets.

The report's underlying public health objective is to reduce excess free sugar intake to help prevent obesity, diabetes, dental caries, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs), consistent with longstanding WHO guidance. Unfortunately, in the absence of policy coherence and substantive engagement with the food sector, strategies that target the reduction of a single nutrient are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes, as they may alter consumption patterns without meaningfully improving overall diet quality.

World Health Organization endorses sugar taxes, but emphasizes importance of whole-diet approaches

Drawing on global implementation experience, the WHO report documents a steady increase in the adoption of SSB taxes worldwide, with more than 100 countries and jurisdictions now applying some form of levy. The WHO finds that sugar-sweetened soft drinks remain a significant source of free sugars globally and provide little nutritional value. Most countries do not tax 100% fruit juice, sugar-sweetened ready-to-drink tea or coffee, or sugar-sweetened milk-based drinks (including plant-based milk substitutes).

Evidence from multiple countries suggests that well-designed excise taxes, particularly those structured around sugar content rather than volume, can increase prices, reduce purchases of taxed beverages, and in some cases, encourage reformulation. The WHO emphasizes, however, that fiscal measures are not a stand-alone solution. Whereas taxes may reduce purchases of targeted products, overall health outcomes depend on whether consumers shift toward healthier alternatives and whether nutrient adequacy is maintained.

The report highlights the need to embed fiscal tools within broader strategies, including nutrition education, supportive food environments, and access to affordable, nutritious foods. It also reinforces alignment with the WHO and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) **healthy diet principles**, which emphasizes diets that are:

- **Adequate** in essential nutrients
- **Balanced** in energy and nutrient sources
- **Moderate** in consumption of foods associated with adverse health outcomes
- **Diverse** across food groups[3]

Looking ahead, the WHO encourages governments to refine tax design, improving monitoring and evaluation, and ensure that policies do not inadvertently undermine equity or access to healthy diets.

The risk of reduce, replace, reformulate

History shows that nutrition policies focused on reducing a single nutrient can fall short when they do not account for what replaces it. This dynamic was clearly illustrated during decades of policy efforts to reduce saturated fat intake. While intended to improve cardiovascular health, the dominant policy signal was often interpreted narrowly: fat should be removed from foods.[4] In practice, reducing saturated fat at scale requires substitution, because fat contributes to taste, texture, satiety, and energy density; it must be replaced when removed.[5]

Across multiple regions, reformulation frequently relied on refined carbohydrates and added sugars to maintain palatability, shelf life, and consumer acceptance. As a result, many low-fat or fat-free products were not meaningfully lower in calories and, in some cases, contained higher amounts of rapidly digestible starches and sugars. Over time, evidence demonstrated that health outcomes depend on the replacement nutrient. Replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats is associated with improvements in cardiovascular risk, whereas replacing saturated fats with refined carbohydrates does not confer the same benefit and may worsen metabolic risk factors in some populations. This helps explain why broad reductions in fat intake did not consistently translate into expected improvements in obesity, diabetes, or cardiovascular disease.[6]

This experience has informed the shift toward food-based, dietary pattern-focused policy frameworks. Rather than simply reducing saturated fat, current recommendations emphasize replacing it with healthier foods while maintaining overall diet quality.[3] The lesson for sugar policy is clear: reduction alone is not enough. Without clear health-promoting replacement pathways, policies risk repeating past mistakes.

Policy coherence and private sector engagement

As governments expand sugar reduction strategies, coherence across nutrition, health, and food system policies becomes increasingly important. Fiscal tools can influence prices and purchasing

decisions, but their impact on population health ultimately depends on how they interact with broader food environments, product innovation, and access to nutritious foods.

Reformulation is often cited as a key mechanism for achieving sugar reduction targets. When grounded in nutrition science and aligned with healthy dietary patterns, reformulation can support public health objectives. The current policy landscape, however, is becoming more complex. Parallel discussions on **ultra-processed foods** (UPFs) increasingly caution against strategies that rely on non-sugar sweeteners or incremental nutrient adjustments, creating uncertainty for manufacturers seeking to respond responsibly to sugar reduction goals.

Without alignment between sugar-focused policies and evolving UPF frameworks, reformulation may be constrained or discouraged. This underscores the importance of coherent policy design that reflects both nutritional objectives and the practical realities of product development and consumer acceptance. Transparent engagement between policymakers, public health institutions, and the private sector is therefore essential. When conducted within clear governance frameworks, such engagement can help translate policy objectives into practical, evidence-based solutions, including gradual sugar reduction, portion innovation, and product designs that prioritize nutrient density.

Ultimately, improving population health requires more than reducing exposure to individual nutrients of concern. Policies that align incentives, safeguard nutrient adequacy, and enable responsible innovation are more likely to deliver sustained improvements than fragmented approaches focused on single nutrients in isolation.

DAIRY LEADERSHIP: A CALL TO ACTION

The dairy sector should support coherent, evidence-based nutrition policies that prioritize whole diets, nutrient adequacy, and access to healthy foods.

Dairy foods promote nourishment and health globally. The sector can work collaboratively with policymakers and public health institutions to translate shared goals for healthy, nutrient secure populations into practical policies and innovation pathways. This includes constructively challenging reductionist measures that lack dietary context.

Policies that focus narrowly on individual nutrients without considering foods, dietary patterns, or substitution effects risk unintended consequences, including discouraging consumption of nutrient-dense foods.

For more information on the Global Dairy Platform's Perspective Papers, please reach out to Dr. Beth Bradley at beth.bradley@globaldairyplatform.com.

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