



Sugar is one of the next targets of health policy makers in Europe. It features as one of the ingredients in the latest food reformulation roadmap, just published by the European Commission. This ingredient has crept up in European diets unprecedented levels. As a result it could have serious consequences for the health of European citizens, reflected in the increase of diseases such as type 2 diabetes. Today, sugar has become very political. And the debate rages on between those concerned for public health and those in favour of preserving consumer choice, avoiding nanny states interventions and protecting the food industry's market share.

Sweet tooth: countering one of our most lethal addictions



Sugar

Policy makers take on the politics of sugar

Europe has just published on 23 February 2016 its [Roadmap for Action on Food Product improvement](#). It caters for public private partnership in food reformulations and fixes some objectives on reducing the use of key ingredients such as sugar, as well as salt and saturated fats. Published during a two-day conference hosted by the Dutch EU presidency, it is [reportedly endorsed](#) by Member States, health organisations and, crucially, food industry operators.

This initiative is the latest in a long series to address Europe's worsening obesity crisis. Europe's post-war affluence has transformed the region from reaping the fat of the land, to being the land of the fat. Estimates from the latest [pan-European EuroStat data](#)--which goes back to 2008--suggests more than half of the EU's population is overweight or obese. According the World Health Organisation (WHO), [a third of 11-year-olds](#) in the region is overweight or obese. And this largesse is

[linked to conditions](#) ranging from type 2 diabetes to cardiovascular disease and cancer.

And there is a positive association between preference for food like sugar and the risk of becoming overweight or obese. The latest to show it is the Europe-wide [iFamily study](#), according to study coordinator Wolfgang Ahrens, an epidemiologist from the University of Bremen, Germany. The study follows a children's cohort of 15,000 ten to fifteen year-olds. "Added sugar should be reduced as much as possible and I am in favour of regulations supporting this," he says.

Evil sugar?

The new Roadmap includes measures such as a 10% reduction in added sugars to processed food by the end of 2020. This type of step-by-step voluntary journey is a well-trodden path. Typically, initial targets are diluted again and again by the time deadlines are met. This is the case of nutrition labelling for foodstuffs, included in the [new food information to consumers regulations](#) due to come into force from December 2016.

In an [open letter](#), the European consumer organisation [BEUC](#) stated that "reduction targets should be mandatory, measurable, apply across all food categories [not just processed foods] and comply with WHO recommendations." They note that their tests had revealed that some breakfast cereals contained more than 25 grams of sugar per 100 grams of product.

Pauline Constant of BEUC says the Roadmap includes many encouraging elements, including setting benchmarks for composition by product group and stronger monitoring of what the industry commits to improve food composition. "The Roadmap should nonetheless have been more ambitious to successfully cut our consumption of added sugars, salt and fat," says Constant. "A [study](#) published this year in The Lancet found that to effectively cut energy intake a 40% target should apply."

But a voluntary reformulation program on its own will not turn around the obesity epidemic, says Oliver Huizinga of consumer advocacy group [FoodWatch](#). "Sugary beverages, sweets and snacks have the highest profit margins, while fruit and vegetables are simply not profitable enough for the food industry. That's why voluntary prevention measures will fail."

Taxing regulations

Sugary foods are as addictive as they are tasty. That leaves many to believe that regulating them via taxation is the way forward. If people keep buying them then at least there is extra revenue to spend on public health campaigns and to repair the damage. One of the few countries to successfully introduce such tax is [Mexico](#). One year after its implementation in January 2014, soda sales were down 12% and sales of bottled water were up.

Countries in Europe have also [introduced legislation](#) on limited scales. For example, Finland has long-standing taxes on confectionery and non-alcoholic beverages reintroduced in 2011. In 2012, [France](#) and [Hungary](#) introduced new laws. It is hard to gauge the results so far, particularly in France where the tax also applies to drinks with artificial sweeteners and low added levels of sugar. It is also worth noting that when a sugary drink tax was [removed in Denmark](#), in 2013, consumption rose.

Although the evidence of a link to reduction in obesity is disputed, many are pushing for an EU-wide tax or for individual [national taxes](#). The trouble is that the EC sees taxation as an issue for countries to manage themselves. Taxation is primarily a matter of national competence “whether it is tax on fat or on soft drinks or other sugar-filled products,” says an EU spokesperson for Health and Food Safety. They add that regulations, such as those on [nutritional labelling](#), are “to facilitate consumer understanding, on an objective and non-discriminatory manner.”

Stop. Wait. Go.

Action groups have so far, struggled to make an impact on the EU-policy making machine. “We have tried it with salt and totally failed due to the power of the food industry lobby,” says Graham MacGregor, chair of pressure group [Action on Sugar](#). “And it is the same for sugar with the power of the sugar industry lobby in the EU.”

MacGregor cites the example of the UK’s traffic light system for foods. Packets of processed foods contain levels of salt, sugar and fat against a colour code including red, orange or green for high, medium and low, respectively. It might be simplistic, but it provides consumers with an on-the-spot reference for each. It also highlights that some foods, such as breakfast cereals and so-called ‘healthy’ snack bars, actually have very high amounts of sugar.

The EC does not like it.

Following complaints, most loudly from [Italian food companies](#), the EC is contemplating whether to [take the UK to the European Courts of Justice](#) over its traffic light labelling.

The reason for such move, according to letter from the EC seen by *Euroscientist*, is that any national labelling scheme must “not create obstacles to the free movement of goods and should be compatible with the Treaty provisions on free movement of goods.” For instance, high fat foods such as parmesan cheese will throw up too many red lights in UK shops.

It sounds crazy, but an EC spokesperson confirmed that “the Commission needs to ensure that the developments of these schemes are compatible with the Internal Market rules and prevent unnecessary market fragmentation.”

MacGregor, who is also professor of cardiovascular medicine at Queen Mary University of London, UK, says letters received from the EU Commissioner clearly state that trade is more important than people’s health. “The view of most NGOs in the UK is that Europe is completely dominated by [the food] industry,” he remarks.

Industrial action

Unsurprisingly, the food industry does not agree. “We do not think sugar contents should be regulated,” says Florence Ranson, communications director of FoodDrink Europe, an alliance of companies and associations for the food industry. “We believe in offering more options to consumers by proposing a wide variety of products with different levels of sugar contents.”

FoodDrinkEurope advocates a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle, according to Ranson. “There is no such thing as a ‘bad product’, there is room for every type of products in a daily diet, providing they

are consumed in a balanced manner, in great variety and they are supported by a degree of physical exercise," she notes.

She adds that they are working on the formulation of many products and have [officially supported](#) the new food reformulation Roadmap.

Others say that their products are essentially about bringing pleasure and enjoyment to people. "We support support our member companies' freedom to market their products in a flexible and responsible manner," says Sabine Nafziger, secretary general and spokesperson for [Caobisco](#), the Association of Chocolate, Biscuit and Confectionery Industries of Europe, Brussels, Belgium.

Nanny state

The industry view is shared by many people across society. Some believe it is too much of a 'nanny state' intervention to over-regulate proportions and dictate portion sizes. Particularly, when other factors such as lack of exercise, advertising to children and just the plentiful supply of historically relatively cheap food are also at play.

"I do not believe that sugar is the 'nutritional devil' which is featured everywhere today. The real problem of our 'Western' diet in my mind is just that we are eating too much," says Véronique Braesco, former research director at the French national agricultural research institute INRA and currently head of the consultancy VAB nutrition.

She adds that it is much easier--and less expensive--to think about a tax than to implement a real nutrition education and to build places for physical activity. "If I were convinced that sugar is THE [factor] responsible for the obesity epidemics, I would welcome any kind of regulation. I just do not think it's the case."

Indeed, a [European Food Safety Authority \(EFSA\) panel](#) could not establish a correlation between high intake of sugars from solid foods--mainly added sugars--and weight gain. "But the Panel did find some evidence that high intake of added sugars in the form of sugar-sweetened beverages, such as carbonated soft drinks, might contribute to weight gain," confirms an EFSA spokesperson.

Sweetened policy

Today, sugar remains a [deeply political](#) product. And the sugar [over production issue](#) does not help the debate.

Individual EU Member States find themselves in the paradoxical situation whereby progress at European level is perceived as "too little, too late." But if they strike out on their own they may incur the wrath of the European Courts of Justice for hampering free circulation of goods.

Meanwhile, it is all too easy to take a conspiratorial tone and attack the food industry. All industries deserve representation. In the case of food, there are no fewer--and probably more--than six umbrella associations defending the interests of hundreds of companies; from sugar farmers to refiners, to the firms that stuff it into our food.

However, it is the degree to which EU politicians act on the industry's words over those of independent scientists, which is the real issue. "It is about politicians listening to the evidence brought by science rather than the food industry," says Saadia Noorani, international public health nutritionist for [World Action on Salt & Health \(WASH\)](#).

So, the question remains: how to sweeten the science to make it more palatable for policy makers?

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