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**SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE HEALTH NETWORK
STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITIES OF THE SEEHN REGIONAL HEALTH DEVELOPMENT CENTERS**

**ROUND TABLE ON REDUCTION OF CHILDHOOD MALNUTRITION AND CONTROL OF
MARKETING OF UNHEALTHY FOOD AND BEVERAGES IMPACT**

**VENUE: HOTEL PHILIA, PODGORICA, MONTENEGRO
25 FEBRUARY 2020**

SUMMARY REPORT



FAMILY PHOTO, Podgorica, 25 February 2020

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Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century as overweight and obese children are more likely to develop non-communicable diseases (NCDs) during early adulthood including a range of chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and dyslipidaemia. In order to tackle the rising epidemic of childhood obesity, timely action must be initiated.

Most children grow up in an environment that encourages obesity. 'Energy imbalance' is created by consuming more calories than the body can effectively use, that is the result of changes in food type, availability, accessibility and marketing, together with a decline in physical activity, with more free time spent on sedentary activities. The marketing of food intended for children is a threat to public health and is of great concern worldwide.

The revolution in the food industry, followed by globalization, the development of information technologies and tools to test and analyse consumer preferences, have enabled food marketing to significantly influence the attitudes, habits and expectations of consumers of all ages. Children represent the target category of marketing of food industry, especially due to the fact that attitudes, habits and expectations regarding nutrition are formed in childhood. Careful advertising tends to gain their trust at an early age in order to achieve a guaranteed profit. Advertised foods are mainly in the “unhealthy” group, that is, high-calorie foods with high fat, salt and sugar content, which contain low

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amounts of protein, vitamins, minerals and dietary fiber. The negative impact of marketing on eating behaviour is evident and can be linked to a growing trend of obesity, as well as other chronic non-communicable diseases.

Unhealthy diet is one of the important precursors of overweight, obesity and development of NCDs.



Round table on reduction of childhood malnutrition and control of marketing of unhealthy food and beverages was held on February 25th 2020 in Podgorica Montenegro. The roundtable was planned for representatives of all SEEHN Member States working in this area of public health. The meeting was enabled and supported by SEEHN Secretariat as one of the activities aiming to strengthen the capacities of the SEEHN Regional Health Development Centers.

The specific objective of the meeting was to review the national policies, recommendations and guidelines in SEEHN MS regarding children nutrition focusing on the preschool and school facilities. These institutions offer many opportunities for promoting a model of healthy nutrition and are also potential access point for involving parents and community in the prevention of all forms of malnutrition and other chronic diseases related to nutrition.

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Furthermore, second specific objective of the meeting was reviewing the possibilities to control impact of marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages high in calories, free sugars, salt and saturated fats, on children. Meeting of SEEHN experts gave the possibility to exchange knowledge and experience in this area. Best practices, lessons learned, shared opportunities, as well as possible obstacles found along the way, were presented. The meeting was composed of round table discussions, and presentations, that provided information on the possibilities for the SEEHN member states (MS) and therefore to have a starting point for future activities (i.e. report on national policies in SEEHN MS, regional awareness campaign, networking and further exchange of knowledge between experts of the MS).

Round table on reduction of childhood malnutrition and obesity, and possibilities to control impact of marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages high in calories, free sugars, salt and saturated fats on children should be the first activity in the row of activities with overall objective to reduce childhood malnutrition, focusing especially on obesity, in order to enable healthy lifestyles choice from the early age among children from SEEHN MS.

The meeting was attended by the experts from nine SEEHN Member States: Albania (provided a presentation and other materials), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, State of Israel, Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania (via Skype) and the Republic of Serbia. Participants from other international (UNICEF) and non-governmental (NCD YOUTH) organizations also attended the meeting.

At the meeting, the following topics were presented and discussed:

- ***REDUCTION OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY***
- ***Situation regarding childhood obesity in SEEHN Member States – review***
- ***Implementation of National Guidelines on Preschool and School Children Nutrition***
- ***HEALTH LITERACY AND CONTROL OF IMPACT OF MARKETING***
- ***Food Marketing to Children – Public Health Challenge, Review and Possibilities***
- ***Health literacy – focus on childhood nutrition***
- ***Challenges of digital marketing***

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As country presenters shared the data regarding childhood obesity, conclusion is that this problem unfortunately is on the rise beside the fact that all actions are taken. Few countries noticed that the latest data are worse than the previous one which is proving predictions about the rising epidemic in childhood obesity.

There are either legislatives or action plans and from different parts there are many challenges regarding implementations especially when it comes to monitoring of implementation like insurance of funds and support for continuation of accreditation process. Through the discussion representatives from the Member states it has been agreed that regarding school meals still there is no full control of consumption of unhealthy food during school breaks, beside the legislation banning vending machines, also stays opened the question who controls catering for the school meals in some countries.

There are some restrictions of food marketing regarding banning in school environment. Public policy should limit salt content in processed foods, the use of hydrogenated oils, and the sugar content of beverages and snacks. Prices also affect consumption choices, so public policies should influence prices through taxation, subsidies or direct pricing to reduce access to unhealthy foods and increase availability of healthier foods like fruit and vegetables.

Children across Europe access digital media avidly, predominantly on mobile devices, generally favouring social media and video viewing sites for mixed audiences. Digital platforms collect extensive personal data from Internet users to deliver behavioural advertising, specifying audiences with precision and targeting the most vulnerable. There is little effective regulation to protect children from this practice. Still lack of recommendations regarding advertising of unhealthy food to children on digital media, close monitoring and evidence-based framing of DM to children is needed. Immediate action is needed to protect children from potential harms of the digital environment and to benefit from the positive effects of the digitalization of our social environment.

Regarding health literacy there are actions through workshops, sharing promotion material but it is still questionable how the health information can be implemented if there is no environment which promote and support healthy choices regarding nutrition and physical activity.

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Recommendations and Effective Public Health Interventions

- Improvement of dietary habits of the population in general, particularly for vulnerable groups women, children - education on healthy nutrition, promotional activities (e.g. promotion of consumption of fruit and vegetables)
- Building environment to support healthy lifestyles particularly healthy nutrition and physical activity, improvement of availability of nutritious food to everyone
- Standardization of nutrition assessment instruments and criteria across countries, standardization of evidence-based interventions across countries
- Population surveys of dietary habits and intake
- Strengthening of monitoring and evaluation systems
- Educational and promotional activities related to breastfeeding and healthy nutrition
- Research and international cooperation and exchange of information related to childhood obesity
- Implementation of legislative measures should be more effective
- Designing targeted measures appropriate to national context
- Close collaboration between institutions (MoHealth, MoEducation, NIPH)
- Sharing knowledge and best practices at regional level
- Common European legislation for the restricting marketing pressure of unhealthy food and beverages for children – Nutrient profile needed
- Defining nutritional profiles that correspond to dietary habits and available foods on the market in MS in relation to WHO / EU nutritional profiles;
- Supporting the Nutri Score harmonized labelling approach at the front of the pack.
- Establishing regulatory restrictions on national level for the production and sale of foods rich in sugars and fats, as well as support activities to reduce salt intake in accordance with the existing Programs in MS
- Conduct periodic surveys of consumer attitudes, habits and expectations about the intake of foods rich in saturated fat, trans fats, sugars and salt;
- Conduct periodically research on the composition of foods rich in saturated fat, trans fat, sugars and salts nationally;
- Apply a set of WHO recommendations regarding to total daily energy intake per person (fat intake in the range of 30-35%, free sugar intake at <10%, salt intake <5 g);

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- Strengthening regional cooperation to reduce the impact of cross-border marketing of unhealthy food and beverages;
- Schools, preschools and other childcare facilities, children's sports facilities, playgrounds and playrooms should be environments that promote healthy eating and healthy habits;
- Increasing access to healthy food in educational settings in collaboration with parents, teachers and the whole community.
- Improve health literacy and consumer awareness of the impact of unhealthy foods on the health of all, and especially children, in collaboration with the media and educational institutions;
- Acknowledge duty to protect children from HFSS digital marketing with statutory regulation, extending any existing offline protection to online content.
- Defining legal age at which marketing to children could be permitted
- Initiating dialogue with food industry representatives.

Based on the previously presented and analysed aspects related to foods high in sugar, salt and fat, it can be concluded that its consumption is a threat to public health and that its use and availability should be limited as soon as possible.

To achieve this, strong political will, concerted effort, and multi-stakeholder collaboration are required. Furthermore, strong regulatory measures and their rigorous implementation are required, as well as strengthening the environment for better food choices and effective monitoring of risk factors among the general and vulnerable population. More resources need to be invested in order to obtain better data on the intake of this type of food, which can be used to monitor the situation and take the necessary measures.

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