

The Ecuador Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI)

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Abstract : Overweight and obesity are considered risk factors in childhood for developing nutrition-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. In Ecuador, 35.4% of 5- to 11-year-olds and 29.6% of 12- to 19-year-olds are overweight or obese. Globally, unhealthy food environments characterized by high consumption of processed/ultra-processed food and rapid urbanization are highly related to the increasing nutrition-related non-communicable diseases. The evidence shows that in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), fiscal policies and regulatory measures significantly reduce unhealthy food environments, achieving substantial advances in health. However, in some LMICs, little is known about the impact of governments' action to implement healthy food-environment policies. This study aimed to generate evidence on the state of implementation of public policy focused on food environments for the prevention of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents in Ecuador compared to global best practices and to target key recommendations for reinforcing the current strategies. After adapting the INFORMAS' Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) to the Ecuadorian context, the Policy and Infrastructure support components were assessed. Individual online interviews were performed using fifty-one indicators to analyze the level of implementation of policies directly or indirectly related to preventing overweight and obesity in children and adolescents compared to international best practices. Additionally, a participatory workshop was conducted to identify the critical indicators and generate recommendations to reinforce or improve the political action around them. In total, 17 government and non-government experts were consulted. From 51 assessed indicators, only the one corresponding to the nutritional information and ingredients labelling registered an implementation level higher than 60% (67%) compared to the best international practices. Among the 17 indicators determined as priorities by the participants, those corresponding to the provision of local products in school meals and the limitation of unhealthy-products promotion in traditional and digital media had the lowest level of implementation (34% and 11%, respectively) compared to global best practices. The participants identified more barriers (e.g., lack of continuity of effective policies across government administrations) than facilitators (e.g., growing interest from the Ministry of Environment because of the eating-behavior environmental impact) for Ecuador to move closer to the best international practices. Finally, within the participants' recommendations, we highlight the need for policy-evaluation systems, information transparency on the impact of the policies, transformation of successful strategies into laws or regulations to make them mandatory, and regulation of power and influence from the food industry (conflicts of interest). Actions focused on promoting a more active role of society in the stages of policy formation and achieving more articulated actions between the different government levels/institutions for implementing the policy are necessary to generate a noteworthy impact on preventing overweight and obesity in children and adolescents. Including systems for internal evaluation of existing strategies to strengthen successful actions, create policies to fill existing gaps and reform policies that do not generate significant impact should be a priority for the Ecuadorian government to improve the country's food environments.

Keywords : children and adolescents, food-EPI, food policies, healthy food environment

Conference Title : ICN 2024 : International Conference on Nutrition

Conference Location : Cape Town, South Africa

Conference Dates : November 04-05, 2024