

[Draft]

## RESTRICTING THE MARKETING OF UNHEALTHY FOODS TO GHANAIAN CHILDREN

### ABOUT THE BRIEF:

Policy Brief No: 2 March 2022

Developed by the Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability and Leadership Support for Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (MEALS4NCDs) Project, this Brief draws on insights from the project's food advertising assessments. Policy recommendations for reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising in Ghana are highlighted.

### TARGET USERS:

This policy brief is intended for a broad range of stakeholders:

- *Ghanaian policy makers and regulators* (including Ministry of Health, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Food and Drug Authority, Ghana Standard Authority, Ghana Health Service, Ghana Education Service)
- *International Organizations and United Nations Agencies* (including UNICEF, WHO, WFP, FAO),
- *Advocates* - Civil Society Organizations, Local and International Non-Governmental Organizations
- *Academics, Researchers, Knowledge and Technical Networks:* Public and private tertiary institutions (including University of Ghana, University of Health and Allied Sciences, University of Cape Coast, University for Development Studies, KNUST, University of Ghana Office of Research, Innovation and Development, Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research- Food Research Institute)
- *Public Health Professionals:* Including Public Health Educators, Nutritionists, Dieticians

### SUGGESTED CITATION

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### PURPOSE:

This policy brief outlines policy recommendations and options for limiting/restricting unhealthy food advertising exposure to children in Ghana.

### BACKGROUND

#### What is at stake?

The increase in overweight and obesity among children in countries around the world is a threat to public health. Among children aged 5-19 years, there has been a rise in overweight and obesity prevalence from 4% to 18% between 1975 and 2016, globally.<sup>1,2</sup> Previously, overweight and obesity were known to be associated with high income countries. However, several low- and middle-income countries, with the primary burden of underweight and communicable diseases are also experiencing a high and increasing prevalence of childhood obesity.<sup>3</sup> Currently, the majority of obese people are from low-income countries.<sup>4</sup> The evidence further suggests that in 2016, of the 42 million children under 5y estimated to be overweight or obese, 25% were in Africa<sup>4</sup>. In Ghana, a research report from a cross-sectional survey of in-school children aged 5–16 years shows that 46.9% of children (42.2% for males and 51.7% for females) were overweight and 21.2% were obese.<sup>5</sup> This is of concern since childhood obesity is a risk factor for some non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases and some cancers.<sup>6</sup>

## **Unhealthy diet is a known modifiable risk factor for obesity and other diet-related NCDs**

While several factors are likely to be at play, consistent evidence recognizes unhealthy diet as one of the significant and modifiable risk factors for obesity and other diet-related NCDs.<sup>4</sup> Unhealthy food environments promote unhealthy diet. Such an environment is characterized by the ubiquitous availability and marketing of food and beverages high in calories, salt and unhealthy fats such as saturated fats.<sup>7</sup> For most African countries including Ghana, globalization, rapid urbanization and economic development activities have increased the rate of change in the food environment towards that comparable to most high income countries. Consequently, this has resulted in a shift in dietary habits from the consumption of traditional nutritious foods high in carbohydrate and vegetables, to include energy-dense foods such as sugar-sweetened beverages, and packaged and ultra-processed foods preserved with added sugars, salt, and fat, including saturated and/or trans fats.<sup>8</sup>

## **Food marketing (including promotion and advertising) facilitates consumption of unhealthy diets**

Food marketing is a recognized environmental factor known to accelerate the change in dietary habits. Food and beverage companies invest a lot of money and effort towards the marketing of their products.<sup>9</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined marketing as “*any form of commercial communication or message that is designed to, or has the effect of, increasing the recognition, appeal, and/or consumption of particular products and services*” and also includes “*anything that acts to advertise or otherwise promote a product or service*”.<sup>10</sup> There is evidence that food environments in most countries are saturated with the marketing of foods that are energy-dense and nutrient-poor.<sup>11</sup> Sophisticated and persuasive marketing techniques that are able to gain the attention of targeted consumers are used to increase the effectiveness of marketing activities.<sup>12</sup>

## **Susceptible children are targeted by predatory marketing tactics**

Children, are targeted by food companies through the use of integrated marketing campaigns including child-oriented marketing tactics on a range of platforms such as television, social media platforms, internet, billboards and posters which are strategically positioned at settings that they mostly frequent.<sup>11</sup> <sup>13</sup> There is evidence that exposure to unhealthy food advertising can influence food preferences, purchase requests, and consumption of such foods, and is likely to contribute to overweight and obesity.<sup>14</sup> Limiting exposure of unhealthy food marketing to children has been identified by the WHO as a cost effective, population-wide intervention to reduce diet-related risk factors for NCDs, including obesity.<sup>15</sup>

## **FOOD ADVERTISING SITUATION IN GHANA**

In Ghana, an array of advertising media including posters and billboards are prevalent especially along the principal streets/roads as food companies aim to draw the attention of consumers to their product and services. The Ghana Food and Drug Authority by law is mandated to regulate all food marketing activities including advertisements of foods and beverage by food producing and marketing companies. Among other efforts, guidelines that apply to all advertisements of foods either locally manufactured/prepared or imported into Ghana were developed to regulate the food advertisement space.<sup>16</sup> However, emerging evidence from ongoing research relating to food promotion in Ghana shows that most foods and beverage advertised are predominately unhealthy foods.<sup>17, 18</sup>

There is convincing evidence of widespread advertising of unhealthy food and beverages in Ghana. A study conducted to assess beverages promoted on outdoor advertisements within an area of the capital city, Accra revealed that over two-thirds of the recorded advertisement products were for sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs).<sup>19</sup> Recently, another study which sought to characterize the food advertising environment in Africa including two urban neighborhoods of Ghana also found about half of the total food advertisements recorded were for sugar-sweetened beverages.<sup>17</sup> At a tertiary institution which encompassed a primary school, an assessment conducted to examine food advertisements within the school's premises shows more than half of the advertisements were unhealthy, with sugar sweetened beverage dominating.<sup>18</sup> Within fast foods outlets, another study reported promotion of 100% unhealthy foods on promotional flyers used in advertising food products on sale.<sup>20</sup> On Ghanaian television channels,

a pilot study found that foods advertised were predominately energy dense nutrient poor foods, especially sugar-sweetened beverages, on children-specific programmes.<sup>21</sup>

## Generating the evidence for policy recommendations in the Ghanaian context

### Key research questions

The food promotion work package of the MEALS4NCDs Project aimed to answer the following research question: **What is the extent and healthiness of food products advertising through the media of television and also within and around public sector basic schools in Ghana?**

And the following sub research questions:

1. What is the extent and nature of food and beverages advertising on popular Ghanaian television channels?
2. What is the nature and extent of outdoor food advertising in and around public sector basic schools?
3. What are the most frequently food product categories that children are exposed to on (a) national television channels and (b) in and around their schools?

### Research methods

Table 1: Food promotion work package of the MEALS4NCDs Project

Methods: We adopted the International Network for Food and Obesity/ non-communicable diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support framework (INFORMAS) outdoor food Advertising protocol, which details the approach to monitor outdoor advertising around child-serving institutions such as schools, and also the food marketing on television protocol which also details the approach to monitor the extent and nature of unhealthy food promotion to children on television. Specific details for the two studies are highlighted below

#### **Outdoor food advertising assessment around schools**

- We cross-sectionally assessed 200 basic schools within 6 districts of the Greater Accra Region.
- Direct observation was used to locate and record food advertisements present along road networks within 250m from the main entrance of each participating school.
- For each food (including beverages) advertisement, information was collected on the name and brand of product advertised; setting, type and size of advertisement; and promotional techniques (promotional characters and premium offers) featured in advertisement.
- The advertised foods were classified according to the NOVA classification system (according to their degree of processing) and the INFORMAS food classification system (based on food groups)

#### **Television food advertising monitoring**

- Top three popular Ghanaian television (free-to-air) channels with nationwide coverage were selected.
- Days to conduct advertisement monitoring were selected using a composite week sampling method.
- Live television programmes were manually recorded simultaneously for the selected channels over a four months' period for 18 hours (from 06:00 to 24:00) on the sampled days.
- For each day recording, details such as channel name, day and date of recording, start- and end time of broadcast program, category of program, start- and end time of advertisement, moment of advertisement, nature of the product advertised (food, non-food), brand and name of advertised food product were collected.
- The advertised food products were classified according to the NOVA classification system and the INFORMAS food classification system.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### **Nature and extent of food promotion in and around public sector basic schools:**

- 42% (2,473) of advertisements observed within the 200 school zones assessed were for food or beverages; 70% of these were unhealthy and 69% were ultra-processed.
- Sugar sweetened beverages and alcoholic beverage were the two most advertised products.
- The median number of food advertisement per school was 14 (range 1 -124).
- There were more food advertisements in urbanized districts compared to rural districts.

### **Nature and extent of food promotion on Ghanaian Television channels:**

- 23% of the recorded 4480 advertisements were for food or beverages; 57% of these were classified as ultra-processed and sugar sweetened beverages (26%) were the most advertised.
- Unhealthy food was featured in 58% of advertisements compared to 26% for healthy food.
- Food advertisements per channel ranged from 229 – 410.
- Among the programme categories assessed, soap opera and miscellaneous entertaining (including variety shows, contest shows and spectacle) had the most occurrence of advertisements (26% each).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Evidence generated by the MEALS4NCDs Project, together with data from other studies in Ghana show that children in Ghana are exposed to unhealthy foods, especially sugar sweetened beverages. This phenomenon warrants urgent action and commitment from policymakers and regulatory authorities. The following are recommended:

1. Advertising within certain public places known to be frequented by children should be regulated by enacting zoning laws. These laws should specifically define zones that must be prohibited from displaying advertisements.
2. Legislation that will compel all foods companies that advertise foods to declare nutrient composition exceeding the recommended threshold on the advertisement, and if possible, the associated health effect when consumed.
3. Food advertisements found to be misleading, especially through the usage of inaccurate claims, should be banned regardless of media platform or venue.
4. The usage of promotional strategies or techniques, such as including incentives, and popular children's personalities or characters should be regulated on products directed or likely to appeal to children.
5. Implement laws that prohibit the marketing of unhealthy foods during peak viewing times for children, such as ultra-processed foods and foods with excessive levels of added sugar, salt, and fat.
6. Enact and enforce a legislation regulating the promotion, sponsorship, advertisement and sale of food and drinks with excessive levels of added sugar, salt, and saturated fatty acids/trans-fats in print and electronic media, and in settings where children frequent.

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

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