



Best-ReMaP
Healthy Food for a Healthy Future

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Contents

Making healthy food accessible to European children - a collaborative effort..... 2

Introduction - The pressing concern of childhood obesity 3

A closer look at the research areas of the Best-ReMaP project..... 4

 The Power of Food Reformulation for Healthier Diets 4

 Combating unhealthy food marketing for children's well-being 5

 Best practices in public procurement: revolutionizing nutrition through public food procurement 7

The link between socioeconomic status and food choices 9

 Addressing health inequities: a focus on food policies 9

The policy-making process: how did we inform and engage people in power 11

Nurturing sustainable food policies: Best-ReMaP's impact and future prospects..... 12

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Making healthy food accessible to European children - a collaborative effort

The Joint Action Best-ReMaP project was a three-year initiative (2021-2023) funded by the European Commission. This project brought together health and food policy experts and other relevant professionals (medical doctors, nutrition experts, data scientists) of the Member States to develop and implement impactful policies and practices on the ground. The main research areas focused on (1) food reformulation, (2) reducing food marketing to children and (3) public procurement of healthy food in public settings, with special focus on schools and kindergartens. In the last phase of the project, experts and stakeholders shared results, key recommendations and lay the foundations for policy-makers to adapt, replicate and implement effective health interventions in Member States.

The Best-ReMaP project consortium consisted of 24 countries (22 EU Member States and two accession countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia). Experts of ministries of health, national agencies or institutes of public health, and prominent universities worked together for creating a healthier environment for children of today and generations to come.

What is a Joint Action?

Joint actions are activities carried out by the European Union and one or more Member States or by the EU and the Competent Authorities of other countries participating in the Health Programme together. Member States/other countries participating in the Health Programme, which wish to participate in joint actions declare this intention to the Commission. Only organisations established in Member States/other countries participating in the Health Programme, which have made this declaration can apply for participation in joint actions.

Best-ReMaP: vision, action and policies for better nutrition

- **Action needed:** The Best-ReMaP Joint Action, a project of the European Union was dedicated to promoting the well-being and health of children through an evidence based approach to addressing crucial issues in their food choices.
- **Creating healthy environments:** The environment in which children grow up greatly influences their dietary habits. The project partners were convinced that by focusing on key policy areas and promoting an evidence based approach, they can create obesogenic-free environments that encourage healthier food choices for children.
- **Policies with impact:** Project partners also were convinced from the beginning of the project that developing and implementing policy proposals in three major nutrition areas can make a significant impact on shaping healthier food choices for children: 1) food reformulation activities 2) reducing harmful food marketing to children, and 3) quality based food public procurements.

Introduction - The pressing concern of childhood obesity

Childhood obesity is a pressing health concern in Europe, with 20% of children and adolescents being overweight or obese. Disturbingly, it is projected that by 2035, childhood obesity will grow with 61% for boys and 75% for girls, imposing significant economic and health burdens.

This problem stems from a complex interplay of factors, including genetics, family, local communities, and socio-economic status. Food choices are influenced by cultural and societal norms, making the battle against childhood obesity challenging.

Obesity in childhood impacts various bodily systems, leading to reduced life expectancy and increased risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular issues. Moreover, it has severe psychosocial consequences, affecting self-esteem, mental health, and educational performance.

The consequences of childhood obesity go beyond individual health. Treating obesity and its associated chronic diseases will consume 8.4% of the health budget of OECD countries over the next three decades, amounting to a 3.3% reduction in GDP.

To combat this issue, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Efforts must include reformulating foods, restricting harmful food marketing to children, and improving food quality in schools through public procurement. Public health interventions aimed at promoting healthier lifestyles have a positive impact and can yield significant economic benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed additional risks as it affected mobility, exposed children to increased online marketing, and led to less physical activity and unhealthy dietary choices.

In conclusion, childhood obesity is a complex and urgent issue requiring a comprehensive, society-wide effort to create a healthier future for European children and adolescents. By implementing evidence-based policies and interventions, we can build a better, healthier future for generations to come.

A closer look at the research areas of the Best-ReMaP project

The Power of Food Reformulation for Healthier Diets

Food reformulation (improving the nutritional content of commonly consumed food products) is a powerful strategy to promote healthier diets for children and adolescents in Europe. Food reformulation involves modifying recipes or compositions to reduce harmful ingredients, such as sugar, salt, and saturated fat. By doing so, we can create a positive impact on children's health and well-being.

Understanding food reformulation: healthier choices made easy

Food reformulation experts aimed to make healthier food choices more accessible and appealing to children. By reducing harmful ingredients in popular food categories like bread products, breakfast cereals, delicatessen meats, dairy products, and soft drinks, we can significantly improve the nutritional quality of these items. Healthier alternatives can lead to better eating habits and improved overall well-being.

The European response: a coordinated monitoring system

The Best-ReMaP project has taken a proactive approach to food reformulation by implementing a coordinated processed food monitoring system. This system involves several key steps, including prioritizing food categories for monitoring, standardizing data categories for comparisons, exploring alternative data sources, and establishing clear guidelines for data collection. This approach allows for accurate assessments and identification of reformulation opportunities.

Collaboration and progress: a shared responsibility

Addressing childhood obesity and promoting food reformulation requires collaboration among various stakeholders. Governments, private sectors, research institutions, and civil society must work together to share best practices and resources. By fostering a united effort, we can create a more supportive environment for healthier food choices and meaningful change.

The future: a healthier generation

As we move forward, continuous monitoring and evaluation will be essential to measure the impact of food reformulation efforts. Regular assessments will help us understand the effectiveness of reformulation initiatives on children's diets and health outcomes. By learning from the data and adjusting strategies, we can continuously improve our efforts and create a brighter future for Europe's children.

The Best-ReMaP data lives on in the Fable tool

The European Commission's newest tool, the **Food And Beverages Labels Explorer** – or [FABLE](#) is a web-based nutrition information tool provided by the Commission's Joint Research Centre. It hosts data from previous EU projects, as well as the Best-ReMaP data that was collected by our experts. FABLE gives Europe's citizens and organisations the chance to:

- monitor the nutritional quality of the food offer, which can
- incentivise reformulation efforts and lead to an improved food offer, thereby
- making healthier choices more available to consumers.

Table: Summary of the nutrients of interest for the Best-ReMaP five priority food categories

| | Fat | Saturated fat | Sugar | Protein | Fibre | Salt |
|--|---|---|--------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|
| Bread products | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Breakfast cereals | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Delicatessen meats and similar | X | X | X | X | | X |
| Fresh dairy products and desserts | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Soft drinks | X | X | | | | |
| | (only for milk and plant-based beverages) | (only for milk and plant-based beverages) | X | | X | X |

Combating unhealthy food marketing for children's well-being

Understanding the challenge: protecting children's health

Unhealthy food marketing significantly influences the dietary choices of European children and adolescents, contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic. Childhood eating habits have a profound impact on lifelong health, underscoring the importance of fostering healthy nutritional environments. Regrettably, children are constantly exposed to persuasive food marketing across various platforms, promoting high-fat, high-sugar, and high-salt (HFSS) foods. Unhealthy food marketing encompasses any communication that promotes these foods to children, including advertising, sponsorships, product placements, and celebrity endorsements. It is particularly effective in targeting children, who are more susceptible to persuasive marketing techniques. Moreover, children may perceive unhealthy foods as healthy when marketed positively.

There is an urgent need to shield children from the detrimental effects of food marketing and to nurture their development of healthy food values and preferences. Restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children aligns with key recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, advocating for policy actions to combat childhood obesity and ensure the health of future generations of Europeans.

Towards healthier generations

The primary objectives of this project were to identify, develop, and disseminate best policy practices aimed at reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing. This endeavor encompassed the creation of methods and tools for monitoring the extent and nature of marketing exposure while providing support to Member States in implementing new EU regulations governing audiovisual media services.

Strategic solutions

The examination of our research data has revealed a significant difference in viewpoints. On one hand, the public, civil society groups, and the health sector have shown a willingness to limit the promotion of unhealthy foods, recognizing the harm it can cause. However, a substantial obstacle has arisen in the form of resistance from governmental bodies, which has hindered our progress in this area.

To address these challenges, our team had put forward a series of strategic actions. We propose that governments take the lead in regulating this issue, emphasizing that this approach is more effective than allowing the industry to regulate itself. We also advocated for a comprehensive ban on the advertising of unhealthy foods across various channels, particularly focusing on digital media, where children are highly exposed.

Another important recommendation is to raise the age limit for these marketing regulations to include individuals up to the age of 18, ensuring that all children are protected. Additionally, we suggested the creation of a government-led Nutrient Profile Model (NPM) based on guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO), which will play a crucial role in shaping these regulations.

To support these efforts, it is crucial to allocate both financial resources and manpower for monitoring food marketing and provide training to improve awareness in this field. We also

recommend the establishment of administrative bodies responsible for enforcing national food marketing codes, which will strengthen the effectiveness of these regulations.

Expanding the scope of regulations to cover emerging digital media, including influencer marketing, is deemed essential. However, we stress the importance of remaining adaptable by regularly updating the food marketing code to keep pace with evolving industry strategies.

In our pursuit of effective monitoring, we recognized the need to strike a delicate balance between scrutinizing digital advertising and safeguarding the privacy of children. This emphasizes the importance of thoughtful consideration in our approach.

Research data revealed that while public and civil society stakeholders and the health sector were open to limiting unhealthy food marketing, governmental resistance often hindered progress.

Challenges ahead: defining success conditions

Experts identified several critical challenges for future efforts, including defining "unhealthy" food, raising public awareness, addressing GDPR-related hurdles, improving monitoring tools, mitigating food industry pressure, and managing practical research aspects.

The path to sustainability: collaborative efforts

To ensure the long term effect of project achievements, the project emphasizes the need to collaborate with organizations like WHO, World Obesity Federation, BEUC, UNICEF, European Public Health Alliance, and the International Advertising Association. Common strategies to engage the food industry, advocate for government action, and counter opposition arguments will be essential for a brighter, healthier future that can be created for the younger generation.

Best practices in public procurement: revolutionizing nutrition through public food procurement

Overview

Public procurement, which involves the purchase of goods, services, and works by governments and state-owned enterprises, holds immense potential to shape public health-driven policies in Europe. Public institutions like schools and kindergartens play a crucial role in children's daily lives and dietary habits. To combat childhood obesity our project undertook the task of enhancing the quality of food served in these public institutions through transparent procurement practices.

Understanding the challenge: nurturing healthy environments

With children spending a significant portion of their day in educational environments and consuming a substantial portion of their daily energy intake there, the quality of food in these settings is pivotal. Public procurement becomes a powerful tool in promoting nutritious meals and fostering healthier eating habits among children.

A path to better nutrition

The core objectives of this research area were to enhance understanding, knowledge, and skills regarding public food procurement, establish a unified procurement system, recommend procurement procedures based on quality standards, and propose minimum criteria for sustainable procurement.

Strategic actions and solutions

Experts implemented a series of strategic actions to work toward their objectives. These actions included a thorough assessment of existing tools for public food procurement, with a focus on understanding their effects on food quality and the procurement process. Furthermore, the project conducted investigations into the impact of increased funding on the development of procurement tools and staff training. An active involvement in shaping national action plans to guide updates to procurement legislation was also a priority. Our experts explored the potential influence of mandatory standards on procurement legislation, aiming to drive positive changes in this domain. To foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and capacity building, the project successfully established an inter-sectoral public procurement hub. Throughout these efforts, the importance of ensuring a harmonized and transparent implementation of unified procurement legislation across EU countries remained a critical consideration.

In addition, case studies were written to offer a comprehensive understanding of how individual Member States have approached public food procurement in educational settings. By drawing insights from their experiences and formulating recommendations, these studies contribute to the development of a more practical and effective framework, ultimately aiding all EU Member States in enhancing their public food procedures and fostering sustainable food systems in schools and kindergartens.

Challenges ahead: obstacles to overcome

In the domain of public food procurement, several significant challenges came to light. These included the absence of regulations extending to the food environment beyond school premises, potentially undermining the effectiveness of efforts made within schools. Additionally, a prevalent reliance on price as the primary criterion for food procurement was observed, posing challenges to prioritizing nutritional quality. Administrative complexities, including difficulties in integrating local products into procurement processes, further complicated matters. The harmonization of EU directives into national legislation often faced difficulties, primarily due to economic constraints and constraints imposed by the single market.

To ensure the sustainability of the achieved results, a multifaceted approach is imperative. This involves fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, with a clear focus on public health-driven guidance to guide decision-making. Furthermore, proactive engagement with the private sector is essential, and mechanisms should be established to incentivize food producers to align their practices with procurement legislation. These concerted efforts are crucial to maintaining and building upon the progress made in public food procurement.

In conclusion, our project's mission is to transform public food procurement into a potent tool for promoting children's health and well-being. By fostering collaboration, transparency, and innovation in procurement practices, a brighter, healthier future is envisioned for Europe's children.

The link between socioeconomic status and food choices

Addressing health inequities: a focus on food policies

Malnutrition not only increases the risk of chronic diseases but also impacts mental health. However, this burden is not evenly distributed. Individuals with lower socioeconomic status, limited access to education, unstable employment, and subpar living conditions are more vulnerable to food insecurity and diet-related diseases.

Therefore, effective health policies should aim to maximize benefits for those with greater needs, reducing health disparities and ensuring equitable access to health. This project examined health inequalities, particularly in policies related to food marketing restrictions, reformulation, and procurement, and their impact on vulnerable populations.

Evidence shows that people with fewer resources and lower education levels, living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, face higher rates of food insecurity and unhealthy diets. For example, in 2020, 25% of children in less affluent households had excess weight, compared to 17% in wealthier households, as per the WHO Health Behaviour of School-aged Children survey.

To assess health equity, a literature review was conducted, focusing on factors relevant to obesity and applicable to food and nutrition policies. The key findings regarding the Best-ReMaP research concludes as follows.

Food reformulation

Its impact depends on who consumes the most reformulated foods. While evidence on its effects on childhood obesity is limited, if reformulated foods cost the same or less, the policy could mitigate inequality.

Food Marketing

Research indicates that children in lower-income households tend to have higher exposure to such advertising. Importantly, Best-ReMaP policy aims have the potential to reach all children, as it does not rely on active choices or agency from children or their parents. Moreover, it enjoys broad community acceptance across all social strata. These findings collectively suggest that implementing Best-ReMaP policy suggestions are likely to be effective in reducing inequality in childhood obesity.

Food procurement

Similarly, providing nutritious food to children and institutions benefits those with greater nutritional needs, especially low-income consumers, potentially reducing obesity-related inequalities.

In conclusion, the three Best-ReMaP policies – marketing restrictions, reformulation, and procurement standards – have the potential to mitigate obesity risk for all children, with a particularly positive impact on those from economically disadvantaged families.

The policy-making process: how did we inform and engage people in power

The Policy Decision Making Forums and Dialogues

These forums played a pivotal role in the project, focusing on policy-level discussions and guidance. Three meetings were convened during the project, gathering representatives from influential institutions shaping European policies, including various Directorates-General (DGs) of the European Commission, EU agencies, members of the EU Parliament, and current EU Presidency representatives. Best-ReMaP experts, external researchers, and food industry representatives also participated.

The forums provided invaluable feedback on the feasibility of implementing project policies at both national and EU levels. The enthusiastic and critical discussions addressed the relevance of Best-ReMaP policies in preventing childhood obesity, even though different perspectives were presented on how to enhance these policies. Notably, the dialogues fostered discussions on collaboration between the private and public sectors. This policy dialogue process was proven to be fruitful and innovative, showcasing diverse viewpoints with the aim of achieving balanced policy outcomes. The methodology employed in these dialogues holds promise for replication in future European projects. It was acknowledged that while the goal to prevent childhood obesity is clear, there is room for stronger policies. Overall, the forums contributed significantly to integrating project results into EU-level policies, offering insights and promoting collaboration among various interest groups.

Stakeholder events: an opportunity to meet, debate and discuss nutrition issues locally

Best-ReMaP project partners organized national stakeholder events during the lifetime of the project. The primary purpose of these events was to inform national interest groups about the activities of the project and to provide a platform that brings together nutrition experts, policymakers, educators, university students, food industry representatives, procurement departments of public institutions and marketing organizations to discuss and address the challenges related to children's diet and health. These sessions offered a comprehensive program that included various activities, such as presentations of core work-package results, panel discussions, workshops, and interactive sessions where participants were encouraged to foster collaborative solutions and to improve current policies concerning key national health-related issues.

To maximize the benefits of the event, organizers were encouraged to select a topic of national relevance with one of the project's themes. This approach helped channel the ideas and perspectives of national stakeholders into the Joint Action. To facilitate a meaningful dialogue, the Co-create Dialogue Forum Tool was used during these sessions that is designed to align various perspectives, to discuss and to take action on an idea as well as to influence policy decisions at the national and EU level.

Nurturing sustainable food policies: Best-ReMaP's impact and future prospects

The strength of this project was evident in the close cooperation among partners, the engagement of numerous experts at both national and EU levels, and the broad participation of national and international stakeholders. Leveraging the efforts to enhance food environments, the Best-ReMaP project findings provide essential support for implementing, transferring, and integrating project results, outcomes, and recommendations into national and EU-level policies. Detailed recommendations are available on our website in the form of Frameworks for Action schemes, providing guidance and advice for policymakers.

Furthermore, the legacy and continuity of this joint action will persist by incorporating the results into forthcoming projects focused on nutrition and health. These achievements will undergo further development in projects such as the Joint Action on Preventing Non-Communicable Diseases and the Joint Action on Cardiovascular Diseases and Diabetes.

Specific Best-ReMaP recommendations are available [here](#).

Many thanks for reading this summary. We kindly ask you to share information about this innovative project with your friends, colleagues, family members who are interested in the future of nutrition in Europe!

The Best-ReMaP team