

## Controls on the marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children in Thailand: legislative options and regulatory design

The Government of Thailand has committed to a ban on inappropriate marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugar and salt (HFSS) (1). This is in response to rapidly rising rates of overweight and obesity, particularly among Thai children. Excess weight is linked to reduced educational achievements, increased risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and negative impacts on quality of life (2-4). The alarming increase in overweight violates Thailand's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Thailand in 1992, which states that parties should act appropriately to combat disease and malnutrition, of which overweight is one form.

The rise in childhood overweight is associated with changes in diet (5). Thailand now ranks highest among 54 low and middle income countries for adolescent fast food intake (6) and Thai sales of highly processed foods are rapidly increasing (7). Strong evidence shows that children who are exposed to HFSS food marketing are more likely to desire, request and eat those foods and thereby increase their total daily energy intake (8-10), leading to excess weight gain and overweight over time. In Thailand, children are exposed to high volumes of HFSS food marketing every day as they go about their daily lives, through schools, sports, supermarkets, television and the internet. The amount of television advertisements for HFSS foods across 22 countries was found to be highest for Thailand (11). In the online environment, marketing by the most popular Thai food and beverage brands selling confectionery, soft drinks, and chain-restaurant foods have been found to contravene Government regulations or industry's self-regulatory codes of practice (12).

Thailand is a leader in global health (13) with progressive legislation restricting the marketing of tobacco and breast milk substitutes and a tiered tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. Progress has been made to restrict food marketing in schools and limit the marketing on food labels. However, to adequately protect *all* children from HFSS food marketing and to uphold commitments to the UN Interagency Taskforce for NCDs in Thailand, controls on HFSS food marketing must be strengthened.

### Recommendations for strengthening legislation

1. Adopt mandatory government legislation.
2. Assign the Ministry of Public Health as the lead government agency.
3. Set reduction in children's exposure to HFSS food marketing as the overarching objective.
4. Protect all children up to 18 years of age.
5. Include all marketing of HFSS foods regardless of target audience.
6. Implement comprehensive legislation covering *all* settings, times and media channels.
7. Restrict marketing in all settings where children are present (child-centred settings, public spaces, retail environments).
8. Restrict HFSS food marketing across all broadcast media between the hours of 6am and 12pm.
9. Ban HFSS food marketing across non-digital and digital platforms.
10. Categorise food and drink as 'permitted' or 'not permitted' for marketing based on a robust classification system.
11. Monitor and evaluate the legislation using an independent government agency and robust enforcement mechanisms.