

Statement in Support of a Sugar Sweetened Beverage Tax in India

April 14, 2016: India's burden of chronic disease is on the rise. The country has experienced an alarming increase in rates of obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. These diseases destroy families and communities. Tragically, much of this increase is attributable to a cause we can address: the dramatic changes in the Indian diet.

Current research suggests that India may reverse decades of public health gains if these trends continue, further burdening an already overstressed and increasingly expensive health care system.

While processed foods in general are a source of concern, an increasing body of new public health research shows that one set of products—sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs)—pose a unique risk of increasing the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

Recognizing the unique perils of such products, India's Chief Economic Advisor has proposed taxing sugar-sweetened beverages in ways similar to tobacco in the upcoming Goods and Services Tax (GST) bill. This follows the advice and recommendations of numerous independent international scientific and public health bodies, including a strong public statement favoring SSB-taxation by the World Health Organization in January 2016.

India would follow the successful taxation strategies in Mexico and parts of the United States, which have significantly lowered SSB consumption. Mexico introduced a soda tax in January 2014 and saw a 12% drop in SSB sales by December 2014. A 2014 Stanford University study concluded that a 20% tax on SSBs in India would avert 11.2 million cases of overweight/obesity and 400,000 cases of type 2 diabetes between 2014 and 2023. The tax would also substantially increase revenue available to the government to support other public health measures.

With over 60 million people with type 2 diabetes, the Indian government has a duty to its citizens to address a crisis that causes such misery, and that threatens to break an already over-burdened public health system. Diseases caused by SSBs—such as diabetes—are chronic, irreversible conditions that will levy a heavy burden on health care spending for many decades to come and will particularly impact low-income Indians disproportionately. India cannot afford to ignore the changing diet landscape that will exact a high toll if current trends in the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages continue.

Taxing sugar-sweetened beverages in ways similar to tobacco is a positive step forward to protect the public health interests of all Indians.

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