

Classifying of strategies and measures against overweight and obesity: a controversial issue

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During the last years, several countries and international organisations implemented or suggested strategies and measures to counteract obesity. Keeping up to date with this still developing field is not easy. The work of M. Cismaru¹ is, therefore, valuable, as she tried to classify and evaluate the existing measures.

M. Cismaru mainly analysed strategy papers, which serve as important background papers of the political processes that take place in Europe and North America. However, this approach portrays only an incomplete picture of the measures applied in these countries. The resulting overview primarily reflects the political acceptance of these measures and to a lesser extent their effectiveness and efficiency, because the classification system was actually developed for regulative measures, which is one of the most controversial domains in the current political discussions. From this point of view, we should ask if this method is a useful basis for judging preventive measures. Many policy options already exist and are well accepted by different stakeholders, such as those listed in the PorGrow-Project (policy options for responding to obesity: evaluating the options)², the EU white book “nutrition, overweight, obesity: a strategy for Europe”³ and the WHO-Charter⁴. These measures, discussed by stakeholders and politicians, should be considered as well.

A comparison of M. Cismaru’s classification system with the policy options of PorGrow, WHO and European Union reveals its weaknesses. Firstly, the three mentioned documents are more detailed and secondly, they go beyond M. Cismaru’s classification system. For example, they list additional measures, which should serve as criteria for a judgement of preventive measures. For example they demand that

- prevention projects should neither stigmatize obese individuals nor focus too much on them,

- particularly disadvantaged population groups must profit from a measure (the groups with the highest prevalences of overweight and obesity),
- ongoing initiatives should be continued and supported,
- measures which have been shown to be effective should be chosen.

This last point is also mentioned by M. Cismaru.

M. Cismaru suggests that policy options should include prohibitions of certain types of food and ingredients as well as the implementation of taxes on food. WHO and the EU on the other hand demand food that is nutritionally more valuable and equilibrated and they favour an adequate labelling. Financial incentives to influence the consumers’ behaviour are an option that has to be reflected upon. Experiences with tobacco prevention programs demonstrate that financial measures can be successful – but we have to keep in mind that in tobacco prevention there is only one product which has to be taxed. In nutrition there are many different products which would have to be evaluated for taxation – a problem almost impossible to be solved for nutritionists. What should be taxed and why? Who defines the guidelines? Subsidizing such food that should be consumed more, could be the best choice of a financial incentive⁵. Furthermore, disadvantaged persons could profit from subsidies, while a tax would punish them.

The demands of WHO, EU and the members of the ProGrow-project are a political compromise. There are indications that the political acceptance of a measure does not necessarily go in parallel with its effectiveness and vice versa^{6,7}.

Therefore, a classification system for preventive measures should be based on evidence and sustainability criteria. Furthermore, such a classification system should also reflect the complexity of the field and it should include all relevant topics as well as the results of broad discussions.

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