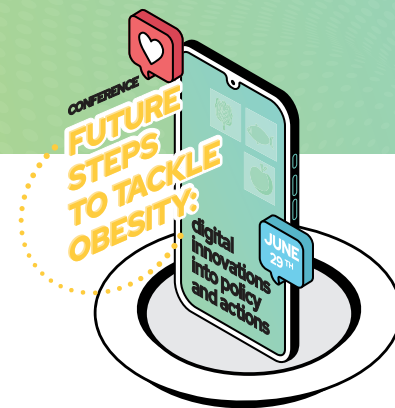


THE LISBON CALL TO ACTION

TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM OBESOGENIC DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS



To protect children (aged under 18 years old) from obesogenic digital environments, through reducing children’s exposure to digital marketing of unhealthy food products and by expanding the opportunities of digitalisation in enhancing the accessibility and affordability of healthy and environmentally sustainable food.

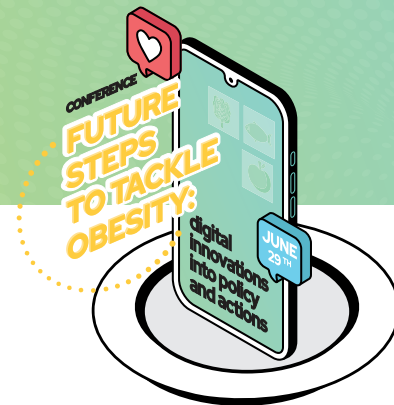
Worldwide, the prevalence of overweight in children and adolescents has quadrupled between 1975 and 2016. Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 years old lived with overweight or obesity in 2016 (1). Particularly in the WHO European Region, 1 in 3 children aged 6 to 9 years is living with overweight or obesity (2).

During the last two decades, the role of food environments in preventing and controlling obesity was broadly recognised. More recently, the widespread use of the digital world in late modernity, which was heavily accelerated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been raising awareness of the new online settings – **digital food environments** – digital settings in which consumers engage with different services, activities and information that might influence decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food. These digital food environments encompass a range of new actors (digital influencers) settings (websites, social networking and smartphone apps) and activities/services (digital marketing, food e-commerce) (3-5), which influence what people buy and eat in different ways, introducing several opportunities and risks. Digital technologies are changing food shopping experiences, with an increasing trend to food E-commerce and to the use of food-delivery apps, with higher accessibility to often less healthy food options. Moreover, this transition from traditional media advertising models to digital marketing has imposed several challenges. With technology and digital media, new food marketing strategies have emerged more powerful. An advertising message often takes between four and seven exposures to potentially change a behaviour, but digital media can amplify this effect by a factor of four (6). Furthermore, digital marketing arises concerns related to data protection and privacy-related risks, which is of particular concern when protecting children. Lastly, digital marketing entails greater challenges for effective regulation, even requiring international cooperation considering the cross-border implications of this type of marketing.

It is well-known that the marketing of ultra-processed and energy-dense food products, that are extremely flavoursome, contributes significantly to obesogenic environments, and substantial evidence demonstrates the influence of these food and beverages on children’s dietary habits (7-10). The evidence consistently suggests that unhealthy food and beverage marketing directed at children increases their dietary intake (7, 11) and has a negative impact on children’s preference for

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energy-dense, low-nutrition food and beverage (9, 11), as well as on children's purchase behaviour (9) and diet-related-health (9).

Within this scenario, the digital food environments can be a new and huge emerging component of the so-called "obesogenic environments", as "the sum of influences that the surroundings, opportunities, or conditions of life have on promoting obesity in individuals or populations" (12).

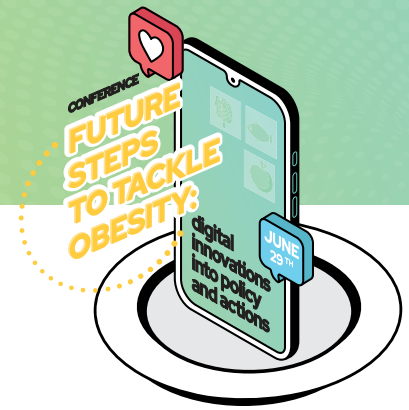
The WHO Regional Office for Europe is working on tackling childhood obesity and digital food environments through a number of initiatives, especially in the context of monitoring harmful digital practices. In 2019, the WHO/Europe developed the CLICK Framework to monitor digital marketing of unhealthy products to children, which gathers different and flexible approaches that may be adapted to national context (6). Additionally, the WHO/Europe NCDs Office is currently leading research into the extent and influence of meal delivery apps in five European cities, as well as piloting a software platform in three countries with an innovative big-data approach to food composition databases.

Within the EU context, several recent strategic and legal documents are also reinforcing the need for action to protect children from unhealthy food marketing. The revised EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), which came into force in December 2018, includes provisions that may be further strengthened to deliver a more robust framework for tackling advertising of unhealthy products to children at different national levels. The Europe's Beating Cancer Plan highlights the relevance of healthy eating in cancer prevention, including measures to reduce food marketing to children (13). Additionally, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is focused on achieving an EU where children can safely navigate the digital environment. To ensure children's rights to health, this Strategy states the importance of developing "best practices and a voluntary code of conduct to reduce online marketing to children of products high in sugar, fat and salt" (14).

Portugal is a "first mover" country in terms of actions to reduce unhealthy food marketing to children. Since 2019, Portugal has a regulation that introduces restrictions to unhealthy food marketing to children, covering restrictions for different marketing channels, including digital. Moreover, Portugal is now leading, together with Ireland, the work package on best-practices to reduce food marketing to children of the EU Joint Action Best-ReMaP. This work package will provide guidance and support for the implementation of best-practices in line with the EU strategies above mentioned.

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To reduce children's exposure to digital marketing of unhealthy food products and expand the opportunities of digitalisation in enhancing the accessibility and affordability of healthy and environmentally sustainable food, **we hereby call on key stakeholders and players to commit to undertaking the following necessary actions:**

GOVERNMENTS

- Take action to reduce inappropriate marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children.
- Develop appropriate monitoring systems to evaluate children's exposure to digital food marketing.
- Implement comprehensive policies to increase health information.
- Promote international/EU cooperation to implement effective strategies to protect children from obesogenic digital environments, addressing the cross-border issues of digital marketing.

PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Understand and recognise the health risks of children's screen exposure to unhealthy food marketing, from an early age.
- Monitor and regulate children's access to digital tools and devices. Parents and families should encourage the reduction of children's digital and online exposure.

SCHOOL AND EDUCATION COMMUNITY

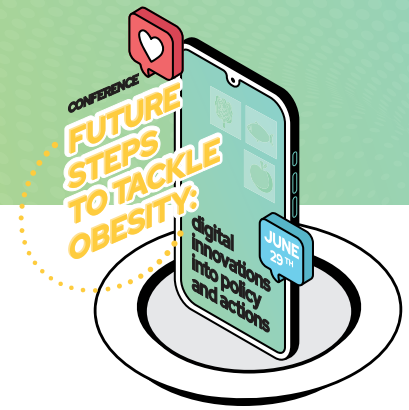
- Support children and adolescents in the development of skills related to their navigation through the digital environment, including the ability to determine the credibility of online sources and information, as well as online social skills.
- Develop and increase online and digital media literacy among children and young people.

FOOD SECTOR AND MARKETERS

- Be committed to a responsible food and beverage marketing communication.
- Be committed to not advertise unhealthy food products to children.

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ONLINE CONTENT DEVELOPERS

- Recognise the social responsibility as influencers of children's and adolescent's preferences and behaviours.
- Be committed to have a responsible communication about healthy diet, nutrition and health.
- Be committed to not advertise unhealthy food products to children or generate content that promotes these types of consumption and unhealthy patterns.

TECH DEVELOPERS

- Develop tools to control and monitor obesogenic digital environments.
- Develop technology tools to increase the accessibility and affordability of healthy and environmentally sustainable food.
- Develop/improve age verification tools to accurately block harmful and inadequate content to children.

RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMIA

- Develop robust and high-quality research on children's exposure to digital obesogenic environments and their effects on health outcomes.
- Research on how digitalization is influencing dietary behaviour.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

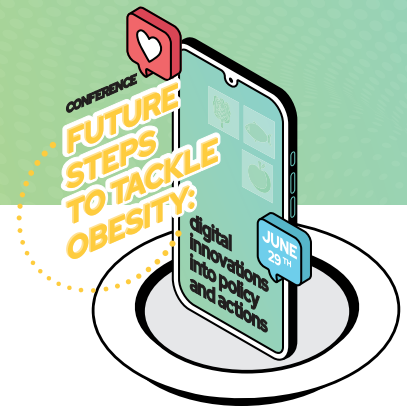
- Advocate for, facilitate and actively engage in the implementation of this call to action to protect children from obesogenic digital environments.

Signed by

Marta Temido, Portuguese Minister of Health

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