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Obesity as a Major Public Health Problem in Portugal: Achievements and Challenges

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A obesidade como um importante problema de saúde pública em Portugal: conquistas e desafios

Obesity is one of the main public health problems in Portugal, and according to data from the Global Burden Disease Study (2017), overweight is among the leading five risk factors for disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) [1]. More than 50% of the Portuguese adult population are overweight and almost 20% are obese [2]. Overweight, including obesity, is also high in children and affects 1 in 3 children in Portugal [3]. Results from the HBSC Portuguese Survey (1998–2014), published in this issue of the *Portuguese Journal of Public Health*, are in line with these data, showing that 20% of Portuguese adolescents are overweight and obese [4].

Portugal is dealing with several challenges in tackling obesity, but the surveillance system on childhood obesity has been showing good results between 2008 and 2016. A decreasing trend has been observed in overweight and childhood obesity during the last 8 years [3]. Portugal will probably achieve one of the targets of the National Health

Plan for 2020 regarding obesity – “Halt the rise in childhood overweight and obesity” [5], as well as the WHO global target for noncommunicable diseases – “Halt the rise in diabetes and obesity” [6].

The downward trend of overweight in children might be a result of the comprehensive Portuguese policy to address unhealthy diets that have been in place over the last 10 years. In 2008 a National Platform against Obesity was created by the Directorate-General of Health. In 2012, Portugal implemented the first national food and nutrition policy – the National Programme for the Promotion of Healthy Eating (PNPAS), which was considered one of the eight priority programmes to be developed by the Ministry of Health [7]. Later, to overcome the challenge of “health in all policies” or of a “whole-of-government approach,” in 2017, the Portuguese government created an Integrated Strategy for the Promotion of Healthy Eating (EIPAS), resulting from an intersectoral action between several different ministries, including the ministries of Finance, Internal Affairs, Education, Health, Economy, Agriculture, and Sea [8].

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Along with these strategies, a shift in the Portuguese policy approach on healthy eating promotion was observed, with more actions focused on environmental drivers of unhealthy diets and obesity. A wide range of actions have been implemented in the last 4 years, such as, a soft drinks tax [9], a law restricting food marketing to children, food standards to improve access to healthy foods in several public settings (schools, health care institutions, and universities), and a national food reformula-

tion plan involving food industry and retailer sectors using a coregulation approach [10].

Portugal is making good progress in implementing the WHO recommended “best-buys” policies to fight obesity and noncommunicable diseases, but the country is still facing several challenges to implement the required actions to change the food environments where food choices are made.

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