

Policy Brief 31

Combating the High Prevalence of Obesity among Egyptian Households: A Pilot Study: Port-Said Households



Executive Summary:

Obesity is a major public health issue in Egypt and its repercussions are not only limited to the health dimension, but also extend to affecting the productive capacity of the citizens. This adversely affects the overall fundamentals of the Egyptian economy. Moreover, there is a current political interest in promoting the health and well-being of the citizens which is reflected in the recent 100 Million Seha massive campaign that measured the weight and height of millions of Egyptians.

The high prevalence of obesity in Egypt prompted us to study how to combat obesity among adult Egyptians in urban communities particularly in Port Said governorate. Targeting obesity in adults in this pilot governorate can help Egypt reduce the escalating non-communicable diseases among adult Egyptians and enhance the workforce. Therefore, the policy alternatives suggested in this paper aim at re-

ducing the obesity rate in Egyptian adults by 5 percentage points in the coming 5 years.

Four stakeholders were targeted in this study: The Ministry of Health and Population, the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade, the National Food Safety Authority, and the Supreme Council for Universities. Furthermore, four alternatives were proposed; adjusting the Egyptian subsidy system, organizing nutritional follow-up services within family medical centers, providing Nutritional Facts Labels by the National Food Safety Authority, and university sports championships for fitness.

By applying the decision-making rule which has to do adhere to the equity, administrative, and political criteria, we recommend adjusting the Egyptian subsidy system and making use of the medical centers.

Solving tackling obesity requires intensive efforts at the level of the state, the regional community and even the international level.

Utilizing the current resources of the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade is considerably convenient for controlling and preventing obesity in Egypt. The proposed recommendation,

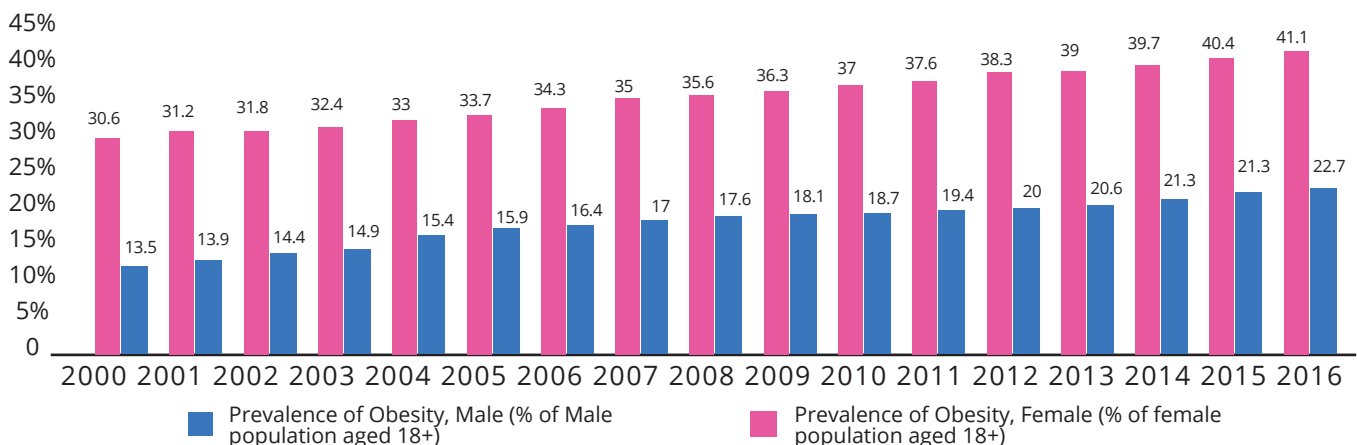
which is adjusting the Egyptian subsidy system, primarily depends on the role of the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade in securing healthy food items in the ministries' different distribution channels, along with providing healthier variants in the list of subsidized goods.

Obesity in Egypt

Despite efforts on ground to control obesity, it is still out of control. With an obesity rate equivalent to 32% in 2020, Egypt is ranked among the top 20 countries in the world and the 10 countries in the Arab Region in the prevalence of obesity. Yet, given the size of the Egyptian population that is above 100 million people, Egypt is the most populous obese country in the Arab region.

Moreover, it is a growing problem despite efforts on the ground.

According to the UNICEF, around 15% of children under five years are classed as overweight, which indicates the incidence of obesity earlier in the family cycle. As demonstrated in the figure below, the incidence of obesity among both males and females has an increasing trend during the period (2000-2016). Moreover, the prevalence of obesity among females is nearly as twice as that among males.



Problem Statement

Based on the demonstrated analysis, it is apparent how crucial it is to address the high levels of obesity in Egypt and the precarious consequences associated with its prevalence. The pilot governorate which is chosen to implement the proposed policy alternatives comprised in the paper is Port Said. The economic indicators of Port Said are favorable compared to other governorates in Egypt.

Target beneficiaries: Egyptian adults residing in Port Said 65-18.

Objectives: The main objective of this paper is to design policy alternatives that can help reduce

In addition, according to the results of the Demographic Health Survey conducted in 2015, obesity is widespread among low economic classes due to the existence of the food subsidy system that provides food products high in calories and represent an unbalanced health diet (Ecker et al., 2016). On the same token, wealthier people tend to consume large quantities of white bread and carbonated drinks (Wassef, 2004).

Significance and Scope of the Problem

As per the statistics released from the results of 100 Million Healthy Life's campaign, 45.74% of the participants in Port Said were found to be obese and those in Cairo represented 41.28%. Therefore, urgent action is needed to address

Stakeholders Analysis

We identified the key stakeholders for this research, then we conducted interviews with some of them. In addition, we used a qualitative research to get grounded expert feedback. We prioritized the stakeholders according to their power and interest in the problem, as illustrated in this figure.

Policy Alternatives

This section aims at demonstrating innovative and applicable policy alternatives that could effectively help mitigate the prevalence of obesity in Egypt and address it from different perspectives. Such alternatives focus on the different groups of the governorate's population, are diverse in nature in order to effectively help reduce obesity in Egypt, do not considerably burden the Egyptian budget, and come at a point when there is a growing presidential concern about health policies.

Alternative One: Adjusting the Egyptian subsidy system:

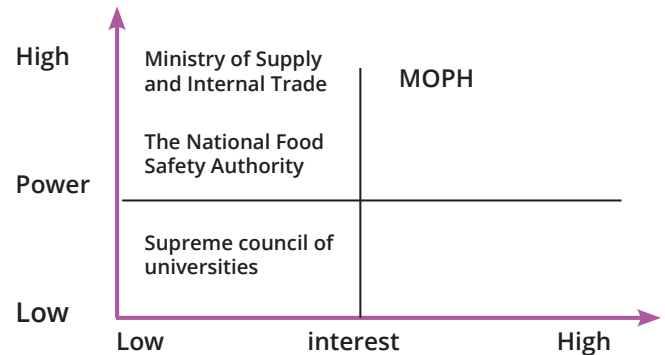
This alternative rests on two main cornerstones. The first is increasing the availability of healthy food items (like veggies and fruits) in the Ministries' different distribution channels, along with providing healthier variants of the goods included in the list of 28 subsidized goods (like olive oil besides regular oil, brown rice, brown pasta and brown sugar which are healthier and more nutritious).

The second element is launching awareness campaigns for the subscribers to the subsidy system who represent more than 60% of the population, inside the Ministry's groceries and service centers.

Alternative Two: Organizing nutritional follow-up services within family medical centers:

Establishing clinics for obesity follow-up in government medical centers which are distributed

this alarming problem and simultaneous action by several government departments in addition to the Ministry of Health, which should have an important coordination and monitoring role, is highly required.



based on geographical areas and population. The project will be implemented in Port-Said governorate as a pilot trial under the umbrella of comprehensive health insurance. Nutritionists, such as graduates of the Egyptian fellowship nutrition programs, will join these centers. In addition, pharmacists and dentists who have pursued postgraduate studies in nutrition can join to compensate for the shortage in the number of physicians. BMI will be periodically monitored for all citizens visiting the centers, especially higher risk group patients who suffer from non-communicable diseases. The nutritionists will design appropriate nutrition plans for all visitors. In addition, the medical centers will conduct awareness campaigns to educate citizens on the complications of obesity.

Alternative 3: Providing nutritional facts labels by the National Food Safety Authority

The proposed strategy helps in providing nutrition facts about food products which may encourage a healthier food consumption. The implementing institution is the National Food Safety Authority (NFSA) as its main role is to track food monitoring and safety¹. Moreover, other Egyptian government institutions that are concerned with regulating food safety exist under the authority of NFSA. Processing nutritional labelling will widen the consumption choices based upon science-based facts about the nutritional ingredients. In the long run, this may affect the consumption habits

of Egyptian individuals. They will be keener on consuming healthier food items.

Alternative Four: Organizing university sports championships for fitness

The Supreme Council of Universities can organize extracurricular physical championships including public and private universities. These championships will secure financial incentives for participants. The championships will be

funded by multiple sources such as sponsors and businessmen. Accordingly, the championships will be a good source of funding for the universities.

Each university should recruit players in various sport teams such as football, volleyball, handball, etc.

Therefore, undergraduate students will have a bigger opportunity to join those teams and exert a higher physical effort.

Conclusion & Recommendations

There is an urgent need to deal with the high prevalence of obesity in Egypt in order to reduce the risk factors for chronic non-communicable diseases, which occur as a result of obesity and unhealthy diets. They consequently exert further pressures on the Egyptian health sector to provide medical services to patients suffering from such chronic diseases.

When it comes to evaluating the proposed policy alternatives, it is important to resort to the different policy criteria that need to be considered in this context. If we focused on the equity, administrative and political criteria, we can conclude that the alternatives of the subsidies system and medical centers are the plausible and applicable ones, based on the choice of the equity, political, economic and administrative criteria.

Addressing and solving the problem of obesity in Egypt must be a well-planned process because it is an entrenched problem in all age strata and socio-economic levels of the society. Therefore, in order to solve this problem, there must be a joint cooperation between all ministries and the concerned authorities, especially a cooperation between the two ministries that are most concerned with health and nutrition problems: The Ministry of Health and Population and the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade.

The Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade can start in changing people's nutritional culture through awareness campaigns that can be carried out by different means in addition to changing the specifications of food commodities displayed at the Ministry's outlets and providing incentives for merchants to display healthy food commodi-

ties such as vegetables and fruits in their stores, this is for long term solutions. With regard to the Ministry of Health and Population, medium and short-term solutions can be formulated to treat the problem of patients who actually suffer from obesity, as well as help their visitors obtaining proper healthy nutrition plans.

Specialized clinics for therapeutic nutrition should be established in places where health care is provided, such as family medicine centers and hospitals, to follow up on patients and provide advice to them to obtain a healthy nutrition plan. This could contribute to reducing weight and reducing the side effects of obesity and chronic diseases that they may be exposed to.

As for the future of policy making with regard to tackling the obesity problem, a higher national committee should be established for this purpose with executive authority. This committee should be composed of representatives from all relevant government institutions and representatives from the private sector and professional unions related to nutrition and healthy lifestyle. The committee rules should focus on conducting research on the health, nutrition, social and economic factors associated with the occurrence of obesity using the most reliable, available information rather than wait to collect surplus information and conduct programs and activities of long-term and sustainability. Finally, and most importantly, expanding the implementation of the two selected alternatives to the rest of the Egyptian governorates and preparing adequate budgetary plans for the purpose of achieving such expansion are of crucial importance for reducing obesity all over the country.

«All the academic references used in this brief are mentioned in the policy paper.»

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