

Obesity dialogues – fostering policy options in Western Balkans and Central Asia

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Introduction: Obesity has been identified as a serious public health challenge globally and a major determinant of premature death and disability in the WHO European Region. More than 50% of adults and one in three children around the Region are living with overweight or obesity, with prevalence close to 70% in several countries. In 2022, The WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (NCD office) organized two policy dialogues with the objectives to highlight the obesity situation, present possible interventions and prioritize policy actions to tackle this public health issue in the regions of Western Balkans and Central Asia.

Methods: Two key professionals and decision makers per country/territory were invited to discuss the current state as well as challenges and opportunities related to prevention and management of obesity in Skopje, North Macedonia (MKD) for the Western Balkans countries/territory and in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (KGZ) for the Central Asian countries. Dialogues were kindly supported by the Ministries of Health of the host countries with personal presence of the Ministers of Health and in MKD with the presence of the First Lady of the country.

Results: WHO’s representatives presented on the burden of obesity in the countries of the Region by providing comprehensive data collected by the NCD Office through regular surveillance, as well as a summary of possible multisectoral actions listed in the recently published WHO European Obesity Report and other documents like the “Best Buys” to tackle NCDs. Country experiences were shared on implementing policies to reduce obesity burden like the public health tax in Hungary and the SSB tax and food marketing regulation in Portugal and also double duty actions to address the burden of

both undernutrition and obesity, particularly important in the Central Asian countries. Participating countries, as final exercise of the one-day event, were asked to prioritize actions, according to the national context, and to assess the feasibility of its implementation over the short, medium, and long term.

Conclusions: Participating countries at both events found that this activity was a novelty in their national approaches to tackle obesity in Western Balkans and the double burden of obesity and malnutrition in Central Asia and increased their knowledge on a whole-of government multicomponent approach to address obesity. Both the representatives of the European Region of the WHO and the participating countries concluded that dialogues among stakeholders at national level, as initiated at these meetings, should be stimulated, and executed if any success in tackling rising trends of obesity should be expected. Follow up on countries' priorities should be performed to assess the progress and to support experts and policy makers in evidence-informed decision making for obesity.

Conflicts of interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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