

## Uganda's priority actions for creating a healthy food environment: An expert panel prioritisation

### Executive Summary

*Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) account for 35 percent of adult mortality. Additionally, every Ugandan citizen's probability of dying prematurely from an NCD is 22 percent. This situation results from the fast-rising unhealthy food environment that drives unhealthy diets that are energy-dense and nutrient-poor. Comprehensive actions that ensure a healthy food environment are needed to alleviate the situation. An engagement with a national expert panel identified and prioritised the review of food standards, awareness creation about the standards as the immediate steps towards creating a healthier food environment, and capacity building to enforce the standards.*



### Unhealthy food environments drive unhealthy diets; thus, Non-Communicable Diseases.

In Uganda, Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) account for 35 percent of adult mortality (WHO, 2019), and every Ugandan citizen's probability of dying prematurely from an NCD is 22 percent. Overweight and obesity have steadily become more common in Uganda over the past ten years (UBOS-ICF, 2018). For instance, between 2011 and 2016, the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) showed an obesity prevalence of 3–4 percent (UBOS 2016). There is growing evidence that unhealthy food environments drive unhealthy diets.

The consumption of fast foods, including unhealthy diets that are energy-dense and nutrient-poor, is fast increasing. This, coupled with urbanisation and globalisation of food production and marketing, exacerbates the burden of obesity and other diet-related NCDs. Accordingly, the government needs to take

comprehensive actions to create healthier food environments, support people in consuming healthier diets, and reduce obesity and other diet-related NCDs.

We engaged stakeholders to identify and prioritise important and feasible actions to implement in Uganda's effort to create a healthier environment.

This policy brief is an excerpt from the study *"Benchmarking policies for creating healthy food environments to prevent diet-related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in Uganda"*, developed by the Economic Policy Research Centre, Uganda, in collaboration with the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), Kenya and the South African Medical Research Centre/ Wits Centre for Health Economics and Decision Sciences (PRICELESS, South Africa).

## Materials and methods

We undertook a comprehensive evidence pack based on the INFORMAS model to assess policies and context-specific regulatory interventions for creating a healthier food environment. On Thursday, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022, experts were invited to a workshop to rank the level of implementation of policies and infrastructure support systems to identify important and feasible actions. The team evaluated 22 actions that pertained to policy and infrastructure domains. These actions were rated by experts in Uganda based on their importance and feasibility of implementation. We considered the actions with the highest rank regarding both importance and feasibility as priority actions for creating a healthier food environment.

## We find that:

**About 16 out of 22 actions were prioritised as of low importance and low feasibility in implementing policies and infrastructure for creating a healthier food environment in Uganda.** After rating government policy actions, the National Expert Panel identified and prioritised 22 actions for creating a healthier food environment in Uganda, considering the identified actions' perceived importance and feasibility (Table 1). Table 1 highlights that three actions, COMP-a, COMP-b, and GOVER-b, were considered highly important and highly feasible. MONIT-b was ranked as highly important but low in feasibility. MONIT-a and PLAT were considered highly feasible but of low importance. Sixteen actions were categorized as of low importance and low feasibility for implementation.

Table 1 Prioritised and recommended policy and infrastructure actions for creating a healthier food environment in Uganda.		
Policy domain (Indicator)	Recommended policy action	Label
High importance and high feasibility		
Food composition	Review and improve the quality of existing standards and develop new standards in areas without standards (e.g., on regulating nutrients of concern, nutrient declaration, etc.). This includes age-specific categorisation-related standards.	COMP-a
Food composition	Awareness creation, documentation, and popularisation of standards and practices for uptake and scaling up (standards promotion).	COMP-b
Governance	Capacity building (e.g., for Local Government officials) to enforce implementation and monitoring of standards.	GOVER-b
High importance and low feasibility		
Monitoring & intelligence	Fast track the Food Safety Bill. This will ensure that a framework law to provide healthy food is in place.	MONIT-b
Low importance and high feasibility		
Monitoring & intelligence	Benchmark existing good practices for healthy food.	MONIT-a
Platforms for interactions	Establish a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder platform on healthy food and/or nutrition.	PLAT
Low importance and low feasibility		
Food prices	Incentives for healthy foods and disincentives for unhealthy foods (e.g., through taxation).	PRICES-a
Food composition	Promote verification of fortifications in specific foods and support entrepreneurs with fortifications.	COMP-c
Governance	Establish a Uganda Food Authority.	GOVER-a
Governance	Increase coverage of UNBS services (including accredited laboratory services) and adequate staffing and retooling of UNBS – technology, funding, and staffing for surveillance by UNBS.	GOVER-c
Food labelling	Establish a nutrition profiling model for Uganda, popularise and disseminate it.	LABEL-a
Food labelling	Establish a system for implementing menu boards in restaurants.	LABEL-b
Food Promotion	Ban advertisement of unhealthy (junk) foods in school transport services (buses, bus stops, taxi parks).	PROMO-a
Food Promotion	Implementation and enforcement of advertisement and broadcasting guidelines.	PROMO-b
Funding and resources	Provide adequate funding and build Research & Development (R&D) technical capacity.	FUND

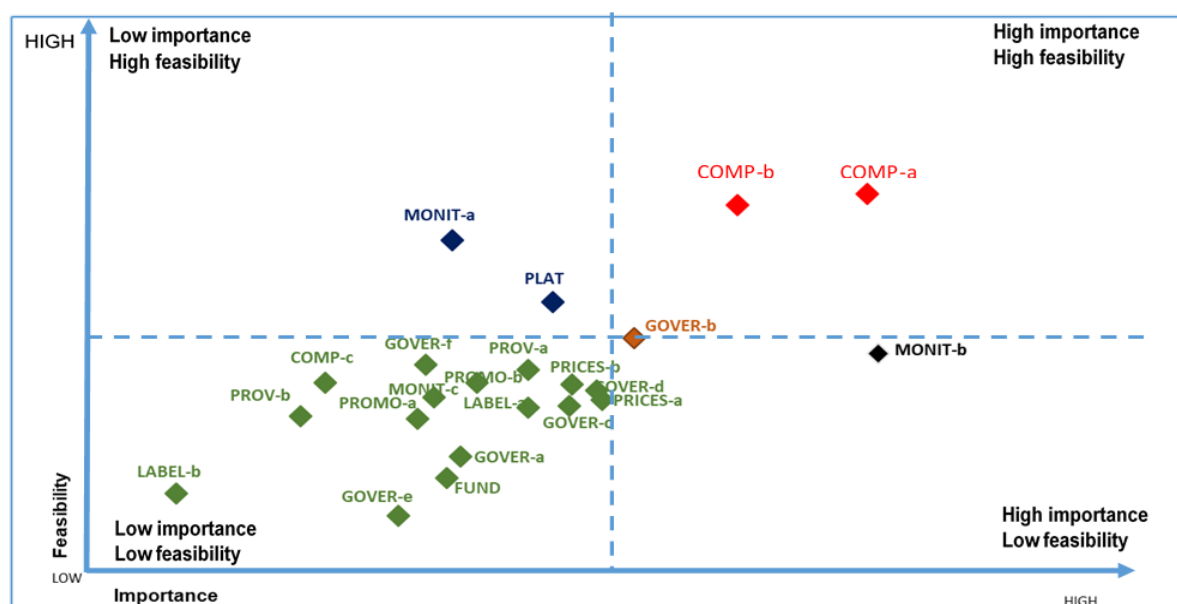
Policy domain (Indicator)	Recommended policy action	Label
Food prices	Review the tax policy to discourage unhealthy foods.	PRICES-b
Food provision	Fast-track the Uganda School Health Policy and review it to ensure healthy school feeding.	PROV-a
Food provision	Put in place a regulation requiring provision for breastfeeding spaces by all employers.	PROV-b
Governance	Address coordination and mandate issues across institutions working to ensure healthy food.	GOVER-d
Governance	Establish a National Food Reserve System to ensure healthy food security, safety and nutrition.	GOVER-e
Monitoring & intelligence	Establish a surveillance system for NCD risk factors at all levels (schools, work places, etc.).	MONIT-c
Governance	Strengthen the implementation of the Program-Based Approach (PBA) of the NDP III.	GOVER-f

Source: Authors compilation using EPRC data, 2022

**Food composition and Governance actions were the top-ranked actions prioritised as important and feasible to implement.** These actions were under the food composition and governance domains (Figure 1). The first was to review and improve the quality of existing standards and develop new standards in areas without standards (e.g., on regulating nutrients of concern, nutrient declaration, etc.). This includes age-specific categorisation-related standards (COMP-a). The second was on awareness creation, documentation, and

popularising standards and practices for uptake and scaling up (standards promotion) (COMP-b). Third, under the governance domain (GOVER-b) was to have capacity building (e.g., for Local Government officials) to enforce implementation and monitoring of standards. Establishing a system for implementing menu boards in restaurants was considered the least important and least feasible aspect of food labeling in Uganda.

**Figure 1** Importance and feasibility of recommended actions for the Ugandan Government: Actions targeting policy and infrastructure food environments



Source: Authors compilation using EPRC data, 2022

**Notes:**

1/4 Red: Are actions that are considered of high importance and high feasibility

2/4 Dark Blue: Are actions that are considered of low importance and high feasibility

3/4 Black: Are actions that are considered of high importance and low feasibility

4/4 Green: Are actions that are considered of low importance and low feasibility

Source: Authors compilation using EPRC FOOD EPI rating and prioritisation data, 2022.

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## Conclusions and policy actions

The national panel of experts identified and prioritised two actions as highly important and feasible to implement. The first is reviewing and improving the quality of existing standards and developing new standards in areas where standards are non-existent. The second strategy is to promote standards through creating awareness, documenting, and popularizing practices for adoption and expansion. In addition, capacity building to enforce the implementation and monitoring of standards was considered important and feasible. Therefore, there is a need to work closely with the Uganda National Bureau of Standards to develop and implement these actions.

## Reference

Tonny Odokonyero, Madina M. Guloba, Blessing Atwine, Milkah Wanjohi, Gershim Asiki, Michelle Holdworth, Amos Laar, Stefanie Vandevijvere and Tiffany Akurut, (2023). *Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) country scorecard and priority recommendations for action in Uganda. This is under a broader project on Benchmarking policies for creating healthy food environments to prevent diet-related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in Uganda.* EPRC working paper No...

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