

DISCUSSION & POLICY TAKEAWAYS



A SMARTER PREVENTION AGENDA FOR A HEALTHIER EUROPE

*Empowering Citizens Beyond
Prescriptive Approaches*

WHY THE DISCUSSION MATTERS

On 19 May 2026, Competere hosted the roundtable discussion “A Smarter Prevention Agenda for a Healthier Europe – Empowering Citizens Beyond Prescriptive Policies” at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, with the support of MEP Michele Picaro and the ECR Group.

The discussion took place ahead of the European Parliament vote on the own-initiative report on cardiovascular health and amid the revision of Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan.

Key message

- Cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and other non-communicable diseases cannot be reduced to single nutrients, ingredients, or product categories.
- They are multifactorial conditions shaped by lifestyle, physical activity, ageing, socio-economic factors, environment, genetics, and individual behaviour.

What emerged

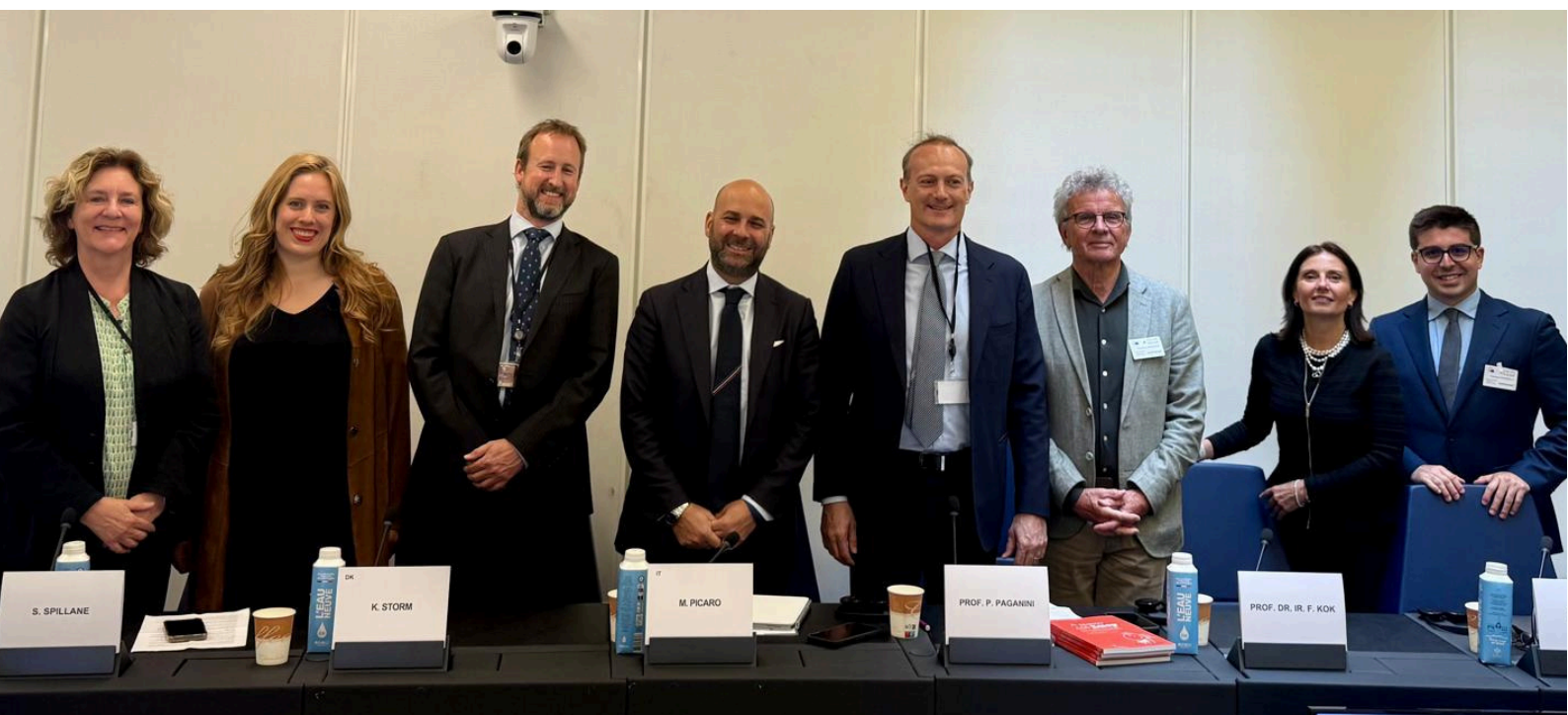
Complex causes require smarter policies. Prevention must reflect the real drivers of cardiovascular risk, not simplify them.

Prescriptive tools are not enough. Labels, taxes, warnings and restrictions must be assessed against real-world health outcomes.

Food processing is not the enemy. Industrial food should not be demonised as such. It should be understood, improved and placed within balanced diets, portions, frequency and lifestyle context.

Empower citizens, do not correct them from above. Europe should invest in education, health and food literacy, innovation, digital tools and personalised prevention.

Europe does not need less prevention. It needs better prevention.



The discussion brought together a diverse panel of experts from academia, industry, and policy:



Sumantra Ray
Executive Director,
NNEEdPro Global
Institute



Frans Kok
Emeritus professor,
Wageningen
University



Roberta Re
Director,
Cambridge Food
Science



Bo Dohmen
Senior manager,
Nutrition & Health,
FoodDrinkEurope



Simon Spillane
Director,
Comms & PA,
The Brewers of
Europe



Annette Toft
Chair, Working
Party on Foodstuff
COPA-COGECA



Pietro Paganini
President,
Competere



Michele Picaro
MEP



Pietro Fiocchi
MEP



Kristoffer Storm
MEP



MEP Michele Picaro opened the discussion by stressing that cardiovascular diseases remain the leading cause of death in Europe and are closely linked to social inequalities.

A stronger focus is needed on evidence-based policymaking, early screening, stronger local healthcare systems, and better health education.

Overly simplified nutrition policies risk missing the complexity of the issue.

Reliable food information should be grounded in science and tradition, with the Mediterranean diet as a long-term reference model.

Prof. Pietro Paganini guided the discussion underlining the limits of prescriptive prevention models, stressing the multifactorial nature of obesity and NCDs.

Prevention cannot rely on prescriptive approaches, single-nutrient narratives or punitive shortcuts.

Obesity, CVDs and NCDs require smarter prevention, based on education, balanced lifestyles, innovation, digital tools, AI and precision nutrition, supporting more personalised and effective health strategies.



MEP Pietro Fiocchi underlined the importance of respecting Member States' competences in health policy, with the EU playing a supporting and coordinating role.

Complex challenges such as cardiovascular diseases cannot be reduced to punitive measures like taxation.

Europe needs greater investment in awareness, education and accessible information to support informed choices.

The Mediterranean Diet, a UNESCO-recognised cultural heritage is recognised as a proven, science-based model for prevention and healthy living.

MEP Kristoffer Storm called for a broader perspective on cardiovascular prevention, warning against narrow or overly simplistic measures.

Taxation and warning labels are ineffective tools that risk penalising consumers and reducing access to quality products.

Education, balanced diets and regular physical activity are the main drivers of cardiovascular health.

Moderation is key. Food and alcohol form part of Europe's cultural heritage, and should therefore be addressed through balanced, culturally aware policies rather than restrictive approaches.

Prof. Sumantra Ray highlighted the need for a transdisciplinary approach and stronger capacity building in nutrition education for healthcare professionals.

A stronger focus is needed on tackling misinformation and reinforcing the interface between research, medical training, and public health practice.

Capacity building in nutrition education for healthcare professionals remains essential, including initiatives such as the Global Nutrition Observatory for Medical Nutrition Education, as presented by **Francesco Giurdanella**.



Prof. Frans Kok provided a scientific perspective on the role of sugar in diet, questioning the effectiveness of sugar taxation in improving public health outcomes.

Several European countries that introduced sugar taxes saw a small reduction in sugar consumption, but no corresponding improvement in obesity rates. In several cases the measures were later abolished due to the lack of public health impact.

Current evidence does not clearly link sugar intake at existing levels to chronic disease, while taxation may disproportionately affect lower-income groups without delivering measurable health benefits.

Dr. Roberta Re examined the limits of prescriptive policies such as front-of-pack labelling, reformulation, and HFSS restrictions, using the UK as a reference case.

Despite these measures, obesity rates have not significantly improved. Simplistic “good vs bad” classifications do not reflect real dietary behaviour, which is shaped by context, frequency, portion size, and lifestyle.

A shift is needed towards more positive, evidence-based and holistic strategies focused on overall dietary patterns rather than single foods or categories

Bo Dohmen addressed the issue from an industry perspective, highlighting the role of the food sector in supporting public health through reformulation and innovation.

The use of contested concepts such as 'ultra-processed foods' as a policy basis should be avoided. Food processing is not an indicator of harm but instead supports safety, preservability and affordability.

Policy should focus on nutrient composition, lifestyle factors, innovation, and responsible reformulation rather than simplistic classifications or prescriptive approaches.

Simon Spillane focused on responsible consumption and moderation in alcohol policy, highlighting the industry's voluntary labelling initiatives across the EU.

Labels alone are limited tools and simplistic warnings risk misleading consumers while overlooking behavioural complexity.

A decline in harmful alcohol consumption, particularly among younger generations, has been observed. Prevention strategies should be based on education, transparency and informed choice rather than stigma.

Annette Toft stressed proportion and moderation, warning that simplified front-of-pack labels can mislead consumers by ignoring context, tradition and dietary complexity.

Policy should distinguish between overconsumption and responsible consumption across food categories such as meat and alcohol.

Balanced, education-based approaches are required, respecting food diversity and consumer choice.



Health cannot be built through regulatory shortcuts. Europe does not need more punitive measures, but more effective policies: evidence-based, measurable, and capable of empowering citizens.

Key takeaways:

- **Complex problems require systemic responses:** NCDs and obesity cannot be addressed through single-nutrient or category-based policies.
- **Empowerment over prescription:** Effective prevention depends on education, scientific literacy, and personalised tools rather than top-down simplifications.
- **Food processing is not the enemy:** Industrial food should not be demonised as such. Policy should distinguish between nutritional quality, dietary patterns, portions, frequency and lifestyle context
- **Evidence before ideology:** Labelling, taxation, and restrictive measures must be assessed against real-world outcomes, not assumptions, to ensure public health impact.

