UNDERSTANDING SUGAR BEYOND THE NARRATIVE

A Policy Framework for Smarter Prevention, Positive Nutrition, and Consumer Empowerment



Sugar matters, but it should not become the whole story.

Understanding Sugar Beyond the Narrative examines what science tells us about sugar and health, how that evidence is translated into public policy, and whether current interventions deliver the outcomes they promise.

It looks at sugar in context, from physiology and dietary patterns to agriculture and global value chains, and assesses taxes, labels, and reformulation against health outcomes, proportionality, costs, and unintended consequences.

The paper proposes a different direction: **smarter prevention built on evidence, positive nutrition, movement, innovation, and consumer empowerment.**

Based on a multidisciplinary policy paper by Competere
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With the contribution of Competere's Scientific Committee
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COMPETERE
Advancing Innovation Trade and Development

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UNDERSTANDING SUGAR IN CONTEXT

SUGAR AND HEALTH

Sugar is part of the picture.

Context determines what it means for health.

Obesity, CVDs, diabetes, and NCDs are multifactorial conditions. Sugar is one element within a much broader health context.





How much? How often?

In what form? Within which diet?

Sugar matters.

But context determines what it means for health.

CONTEXT BEFORE SIMPLIFICATION

Sugar is not one thing.

Different types of sugar have different origins, functions and nutritional contexts.

4

different types of

SUGAR

TOTAL SUGARS
All sugars present in a food or diet.

FREE SUGARS
Added sugars plus sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, juices, and juice concentrates.

ADDED SUGARS
Sugars added during manufacturing, cooking, or at the table.

INTRINSIC SUGARS
Sugars incorporated within the cellular structure of foods such as fruit and vegetables.

SUGAR BEYOND NUTRITION

Sugar is also a global agricultural commodity.

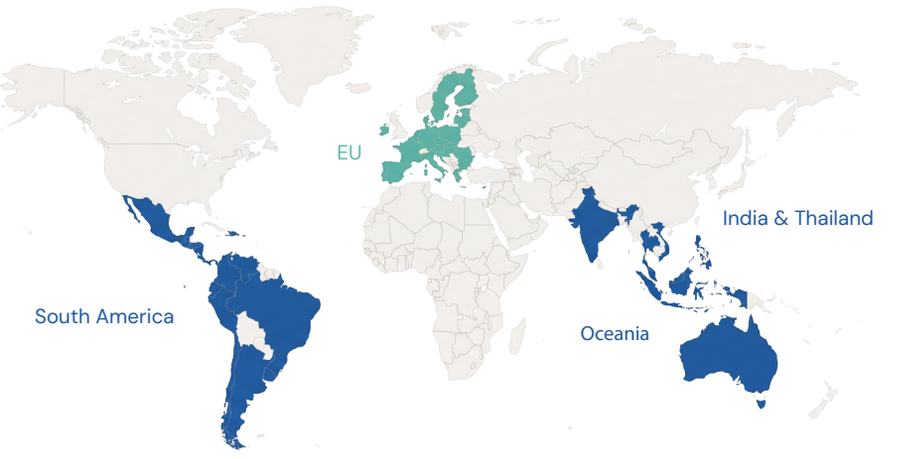
Sugar production is connected to farming, employment, trade, rural communities, and global value chains.

108
sugar producing countries

≈80%
sugar cane

≈20%
sugar beet

LEADING COUNTRIES



FROM POLICY TO HEALTH

Policies can change prices, products, and purchases. But do they improve health?



Intermediate outcomes are not health outcomes.

Taxes, front-of-pack labels, and reformulation can produce mea surable effects. But these effects may be modest, inconsistent, or limited to specific products or behaviors, and they do not, by themsel-ves, demonstrate better long-term health.

WHAT POLICY TOOLS ACTUALLY CHANGE

SUGAR TAXES

Can change prices, purchases, consumption, and reformulation.

LABELS & WARNING SYSTEMS

Can change attention, information, and consumer choices.

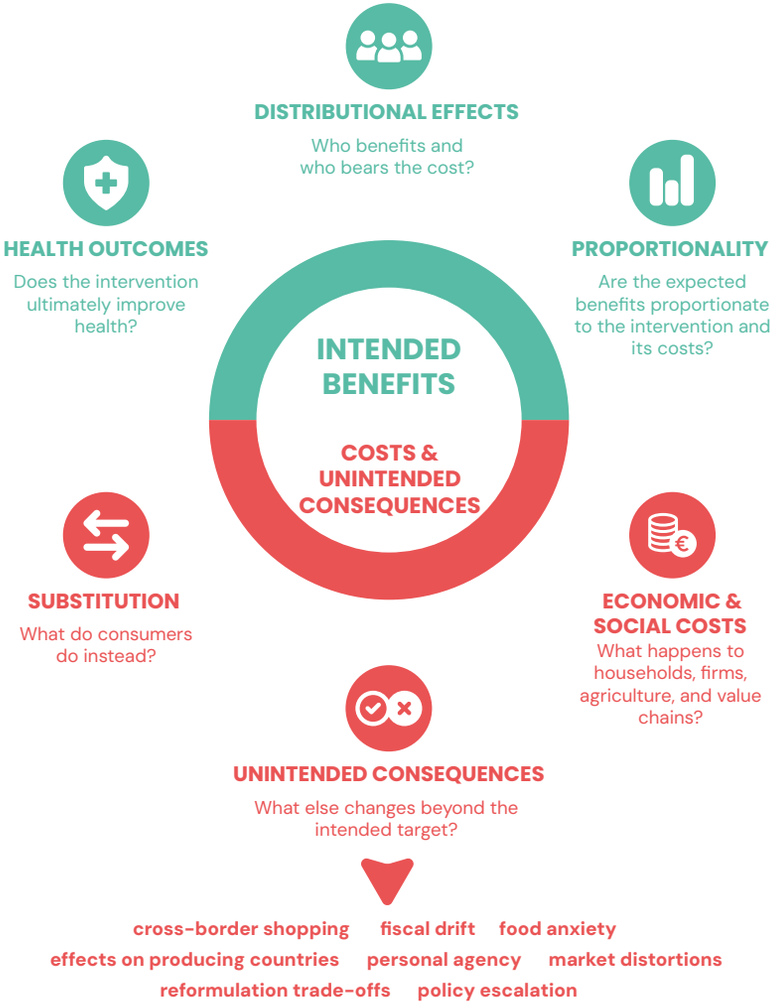
REFORMULATION

Can change product composition.

Changing a price, a purchase, or a product is not the same as improving health.

THE FULL POLICY EQUATION

Intended benefits are only **one side** of the policy equation. A complete assessment must also consider:



A **policy** should be **judged** not only by what it intends to change, but by what it ultimately **achieves,** and what it costs along the way.

FROM REDUCTIONISM TO SMARTER PREVENTION

9 Policy Recommendations:

01
LOOK BEYOND SUGAR
Address the multiple drivers of obesity and NCDs.

02
MEASURE HEALTH OUTCOMES
Not only prices, purchases, products, or revenues.

03
APPLY PROPORTIONALITY
Assess benefits, costs, alternatives, and unintended consequences.

04
BUILD FOOD LITERACY
Give citizens the knowledge and skills to make informed choices.

05
RESTORE MOVEMENT
Make physical activity central to prevention.

06
PROMOTE POSITIVE NUTRITION
Focus on adequacy, quality, variety, portions, and context.

07
COOPERATE
Engage industry, agriculture, and producing countries around transparent, measurable commitments.

08
INNOVATE AND PERSONALIZE
Use digital tools and AI to empower better individual decisions.

09
EMPOWER CITIZENS
Build the capacity to understand, choose, adapt, and take responsibility for health.

Smarter prevention does not mean doing **less**. It means doing what **works better.**

Explore the evidence.
Read the full paper.

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