

# MEXICO

## PUBLIC HEALTH, RISING OBESITY, AND THE NAFTA EFFECT

Across Mexico, Coca-Cola billboards dot rural highways and small roadside shops (*tiendas*) sell bottles of Coke along with local produce. Mexico consumes more gallons of sugary beverages per year than any other country<sup>115</sup>, except for Chile, which has now surpassed Mexico in its consumption of sugary beverages. (The U.S. is number three.)<sup>116</sup> It's not coincidental that 14 million people in Mexico are suffering from diabetes.<sup>117</sup> In 2013, Mexico surpassed the U.S. as the most obese nation in the world, with a prevalence rate of 32.8 percent, to be itself superseded by Pacific Island nations. Mortality rates due to heart attack, diabetes, and high blood pressure have increased significantly along with the spike in obesity rates.<sup>118</sup>

The main driver of these troubling health statistics is the energy-dense, nutrient-poor Western diet, which has already changed the food landscape in Mexico, pervading areas both urban and rural. Rising income is a substantial factor in changing diets in Mexico and elsewhere. However, trade liberalization also has played a major role in what food is accessible in developing countries. After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented in 1994, the number of unhealthy food products exported from the U.S. to Mexico increased substantially. A significant uptick also took place in the amount of raw soybean and corn imports,<sup>119</sup> two products used to make highly processed foods and feed for livestock.

In 1991, pre-NAFTA, Mexicans each consumed 290 8-oz Coca-Cola products. By 2011, consumption had more than doubled to 728 8-oz Coca-Cola products per person (nearly triple the rate in Canada).<sup>120</sup> According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the

consumption of animal fat in Mexico increased from about 34.7 g (1.2 oz) per capita per day in 1991 to 46.9 g (1.65 oz) per capita per day in 2009. A recent study linked these and other resulting dietary changes with an unsettlingly large 12 percent increase in obesity in Mexico between 2000 and 2006.<sup>121</sup> Though obviously this rise was an unintended consequence of NAFTA, these figures help demonstrate that trade policy can actually impact public health.

Interestingly, a review of the research literature indicates that the closer an individual is to the U.S., the higher his or her risk of obesity. For example, a 2011 study at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that Mexican children living in households with close or extended family members migrating to the U.S. for work had a greater chance of becoming overweight or obese

than children without migrant networks.<sup>122</sup> A year later, a 2012 study showed that a higher degree of familiarity with U.S. culture, measured by frequency of television watching in English, was associated with greater obesity risk among Mexican children in Baja, California, which borders Mexico.<sup>123</sup>

Although the prevalence of abdominal obesity among adults over twenty

years old in all Mexican states is relatively high (between 61.4 and 82.9 percent), the two states with the highest rates, Sonora and Tamaulipas, both have borders with the U.S. By contrast, the two states with the lowest rates of abdominal obesity, Oaxaca and Chiapas, are located in the very south of Mexico, farthest from the U.S.<sup>124</sup> This fact is remarkable: sheer proximity to the U.S. has a direct bearing on diet and obesity rates.

Although these statistics paint a bleak picture, Mexico has taken some steps to address the emerging public



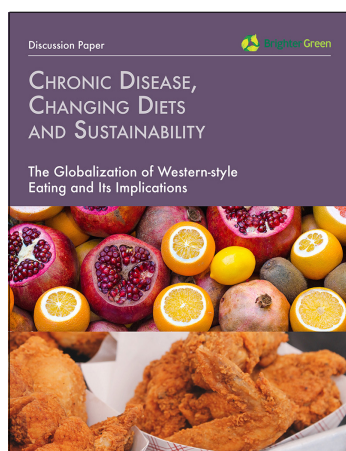
Empty soda bottles on a wall in Chiapas, Mexico

health threats within its borders. In 2010, the Mexican government under then-president Felipe Calderón enacted the *Ley Antiobesidad*, or anti-obesity law. This required physical education in public elementary and middle schools and restricted the amount of calories, salt, and fat in foods sold in public schools.<sup>125</sup> Mexican public health officials have criticized this law, however, because it doesn't ban the *consumption* of processed foods; rather, it restricts how processed food is sold and marketed in schools. In January 2014, Mexico also passed a one-peso-per-liter tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, as well as an eight percent sales tax on certain processed foods. Two years later, purchases of sugary beverages had decreased by between 10 and 12 percent.<sup>126</sup>

All of this leads to a crucial question: How can a country like Mexico go through a nutrition transition

without jumping directly from under-nutrition to over-nutrition? To be sure, the solutions need to be multi-faceted. Perhaps a law banning processed food sales entirely from public schools would reduce how much of these foods students eat during the day. Forward-thinking policy would also subsidize local fruit and vegetable growers and connect them with schools, thereby supporting both local economies and encouraging healthy eating habits among school-aged children.

Although rewriting trade agreements, i.e., NAFTA, would prove a complex and difficult task, it would be in the best interest of Mexico's public health to reject or revise future trade agreements that allow—or encourage—such astronomical flows of corn, soy, and meat and dairy products into its domestic market. ♦



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