

## **A conversation with Dr. João Breda, May 17, 2016**

### **Participants**

- Dr. João Breda – Programme Manager, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe)
- Dr. Stephan Guyenet – Consultant, Open Philanthropy Project

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Dr. João Breda.

### **Summary**

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Dr. Breda of WHO/Europe as part of its investigation into philanthropic opportunities related to reducing trans fat intake. Conversation topics included efforts to reduce or eliminate trans fat intake and opportunities to support efforts in other areas of nutritional health.

### **Efforts to reduce or eliminate trans fat intake**

In 2014, the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, which represents 53 member states across Europe and Asia, adopted the "WHO European Food and Nutrition Action Plan 2015–2020." One of the plan's priorities is the elimination of trans fats from the food supply in member states. The problem of trans fat intake disproportionately affects less affluent groups.

Some countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, continue to have relatively high levels of trans fat intake. The limited presence of national food composition tables and databases in many of these countries significantly restricts the availability of data on trans fat content in foods. In some of these countries (7-8), the WHO Regional Office for Europe is piloting a new methodological approach in an effort to collect this data and eventually support government efforts to eliminate trans fats. Additional funding could help improve methodologies and expand the scope of this applied research.

### **Trans fat bans**

Trans fat intake can be reduced in several ways, including through self-regulation or a nation-wide ban. While there is evidence that self-regulation is effective in certain countries, Dr. Breda believes that bans are the more effective approach. Seven or eight member states of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, including Denmark, Switzerland, and Georgia, have instituted bans that have virtually eliminated trans fats from the countries' food and nutrition landscape. In Denmark, where trans fats were banned in 2005, there is evidence that the ban has saved lives, and not had a negative impact on the food chain or the food industry.

### **Opportunities to support trans fat reduction efforts**

Small changes in trans fat regulations can lead to significant positive health outcomes. Additional funding could support advocacy efforts to promote the importance of regulating trans fats, as well as research efforts. Through research, it is relatively easy to document trans fat levels in foods, as well as the outcomes of trans fat policy changes. Additional research is also needed to prove that bans are the most effective approach to reducing intake. For example, the potential effects of a trans fat ban on a country's morbidity and mortality levels could be compared with the potential effects of other methods.

## **Opportunities to support efforts in other areas of nutritional health**

In 2015, the WHO Regional Office for Europe published major reports on three topics: its nutrient profile model, the elimination of trans fats, and the use of price policies to promote healthier diets. Other areas of focus currently include childhood obesity, nutritional labeling, early childhood and maternal nutrition, and sugar reduction (particularly in infants and young children).

### **Food marketing to children**

Though it can be challenging to regulate food marketing to children due to a series of competing interests involved, it is a priority issue given that many children remain completely unprotected from harmful marketing practices. Main areas of focus include:

1. Monitoring of food marketing to children through digital media sources
2. Informing governments about relevant trends
3. Advocating for the use of nutrient profiles in the regulation of food marketing to children

While European countries have tended to favor self-regulation in this area, many are aware that stricter regulations are necessary. Additional funding could support further research to help monitor and understand this issue.

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<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>*