

Briefing Note

Transforming Urban Markets into Health-Promoting Markets: Addressing Health-Harming Commercial Determinants of Health

Audience: City/Municipal Governments, Provincial Health Offices, Health inspectors, Market Authorities, Urban Planning Agencies, Civil Society Organizations

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Purpose: To provide policy guidance for transforming urban markets into health-promoting environments by addressing health-harming commercial determinants of health (CDoH) and aligning market practices with WHO recommendations on tobacco control, healthy diets, salt reduction, sugar reduction, and reduction of ultra-processed food consumption.



Executive Summary

Markets are critical environments where daily **consumer choices** are shaped. While markets provide access to food, goods, and services, they can also expose populations to health-harming products and commercial practices. The widespread promotion and

availability of tobacco products, sugar-sweetened beverages, highly processed foods, and foods high in salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats contribute significantly to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and obesity.

A **Healthy Market** is an urban marketplace designed and governed to ensure that healthy products are accessible, affordable, attractive, and promoted, while the availability, marketing, and influence of health-harming products are reduced.

Transforming markets offers a practical opportunity for cities to advance public health, support local food systems, promote equity, and contribute to sustainable urban development.

Why Markets Matter for Health

Consumers make numerous food and lifestyle purchasing decisions in markets every day. Commercial actors influence these decisions through:

- Product placement
- Marketing and advertising
- Pricing strategies
- Product availability
- Sponsorship and promotions
- Information provided to consumers

These factors can either support or undermine public health.

A health-promoting market

helps shift consumer demand toward:

- ✓ Fresh fruits and vegetables
- ✓ Whole grains and legumes
- ✓ Healthy beverages and clean drinking water
- ✓ Minimally processed foods
- ✓ Locally produced nutritious foods

While reducing exposure to:

- ✗ Tobacco products
- ✗ Sugar-sweetened beverages
- ✗ High-salt foods
- ✗ Ultra-processed foods
- ✗ Misleading health claims and marketing

Health-Harming Commercial Determinants in Urban Markets

1. Tobacco Availability and Promotion

Tobacco remains one of the leading preventable causes of death worldwide.

Common market-related challenges include:

- Tobacco sales near schools and health facilities
- Point-of-sale promotion
- Product displays targeting youth
- Tobacco advertising and sponsorship

Recommended Actions

Aligned with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC):

- Establish smoke-free markets.
- Remove tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship.
- Restrict visible tobacco displays.
- Prohibit tobacco sales near schools and child-focused facilities.
- Strengthen enforcement of minimum-age purchasing laws.
- Require vendor compliance with tobacco-control regulations.

2. Excessive Salt Consumption

High sodium intake contributes significantly to hypertension, stroke, and cardiovascular disease. Market environments often encourage high-salt consumption through:

- Processed foods
- Packaged snacks
- Prepared street foods
- Condiments with high sodium content

Recommended Actions

In line with WHO sodium reduction guidance:

- Promote low-sodium alternatives.
- Encourage reformulation of packaged food products.
- Introduce front-of-pack nutrition labeling.

- Support vendor education on healthier food preparation.
 - Establish healthy food procurement standards for market food outlets.
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3. Excessive Sugar Consumption

Sugar-sweetened beverages and high-sugar products contribute to obesity, diabetes, dental disease, and cardiovascular risks.

Common Market Challenges

- Aggressive beverage marketing
- Promotional discounts
- Sugar-sweetened beverages placed prominently
- Child-targeted advertising

Recommended Actions

- Ensure widespread access to safe drinking water.
 - Restrict marketing of sugary drinks to children.
 - Promote healthier beverage options.
 - Encourage healthier retail placement practices.
 - Support consumer education campaigns on sugar reduction.
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4. Ultra-Processed Food Environments

Ultra-processed foods are increasingly dominating urban food systems due to:

- Convenience
- Long shelf life
- Aggressive marketing
- High profitability

However, regular consumption is associated with increased risks of obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.

Recommended Actions

- Increase shelf space for fresh foods.
- Support local fruit and vegetable vendors.
- Create incentives for healthy-food retailers.

- Restrict promotions that disproportionately favor unhealthy products.
 - Improve visibility and affordability of minimally processed foods.
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Vision of a Healthy Urban Market

A healthy market should provide:

Healthy Products

- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains
- Legumes and nuts
- Healthy oils
- Safe drinking water
- Fresh local foods

Healthy Information

- Nutrition labeling
- Transparent product information
- Public health messaging
- Consumer awareness campaigns

Healthy Commercial Practices

- Responsible marketing
- No tobacco promotion
- Limited unhealthy food advertising
- Ethical business conduct

Healthy Physical Environment

- Clean sanitation facilities
 - Waste management systems
 - Safe and accessible infrastructure
 - Inclusive access for older persons, children, and persons with disabilities
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How Cities Can Transform Markets into Health-Promoting Markets

Step 1: Adopt a Healthy Market Policy

Municipal governments should establish clear standards for:

- Healthy food availability
- Tobacco-free environments
- Nutrition standards
- Vendor responsibilities
- Public health promotion activities

Step 2: Improve Product Availability

Cities can:

- Prioritize permits for healthy-food vendors.
 - Support local farmers and producers.
 - Create fresh-food zones.
 - Increase access to affordable fruits and vegetables.
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Goal: Make healthy options the default and easiest choice.

Step 3: Regulate Marketing and Promotions

Authorities should:

- Restrict tobacco marketing.
- Restrict marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children.
- Control point-of-sale promotions.
- Prohibit misleading health claims.

Goal: Reduce demand generated by unhealthy commercial practices.

Step 4: Use Healthy Market Design

Healthy design principles include:

- Prominent placement of healthy foods
- Attractive displays of fruits and vegetables
- Easy access to water stations
- Healthy cooking demonstration areas
- Space for nutrition education

The physical layout of markets can significantly influence purchasing decisions.

Step 5: Introduce Healthy Vendor Incentives

Cities may provide:

Reduced licensing fees

Recognition schemes

Technical assistance

Market branding opportunities for vendors that meet healthy-market standards.

Step 6: Engage Communities

Healthy markets should be co-designed with:

- Community members
- Consumer groups
- Public-health experts
- Local producers
- Market vendors

Community participation improves acceptance and sustainability.

Key Indicators for Monitoring Progress

Cities can track:

Indicator	Target Direction
Fruit and vegetable sales	Increase
Availability of healthy foods	Increase
Tobacco advertising	Eliminate
Market smoking violations	Reduce
Availability of sugary drinks	Reduce
Availability of ultra-processed foods	Reduce
Access to free drinking water	Increase
Consumer awareness of healthy choices	Increase

Conclusion

Urban markets are powerful environments that shape dietary habits, tobacco exposure, and consumer behavior. By aligning market policies with WHO recommendations on tobacco control, healthier diets, salt reduction, sugar reduction, and the reduction of ultra-processed foods, cities can transform markets into engines for health promotion.

Healthy markets are not merely places of commerce, they are public assets that can contribute to healthier populations, stronger local economies, reduced NCD burden, and more sustainable urban development.

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Disclaimer: This briefing note is a technical draft informed by WHO public health principles and is not an official WHO publication or policy document.