Leaner times ahead

Obesity in Europe is reaching epidemic proportions, but Europe's policy-makers need more information about what controls might be acceptable and effective. The PORGROW project will provide national and cross-national information to analyse the varying perceptions and judgements of key stakeholder groups in nine countries. This should contribute to identifying promising policy initiatives, and helping policy-makers, industry bodies, public health and medical groups to make informed strategic choices.

Obesity is an intractable problem, causing suffering and predisposition to other medical conditions for the individual, and medical and social costs to governments. Treatment of obesity could be tackled in a variety of ways, but far less has been done to establish the optimal strategy for its prevention. It is not even clear whether there is an optimal way, or whether regional, nutritional, traditional or other differences in diet or culture mean that approaches should vary in different countries.

The PORGROW project will remove these uncertainties by using an innovative methodology to define how decisions on preventing obesity could best be made. For example, foods which are currently over-consumed, like manufactured cakes and biscuits, could be made less attractive by reducing subsidies, or the prices of fruit and vegetables could be reduced by increasing subsidies. Information on the nutritional value of foods could be made more accessible and meaningful to consumers, or marketing of locally-produced fruit and vegetables could be encouraged. PORGROW will employ the expertise of project participants to collect views on these possible approaches in nine countries, representing a broad range of geographic and demographic types. For this reason, their inputs can be expected to reflect a wide range of dietary, cooking, and physical activity regimes.

Multi-criteria mapping

The methodology to be used – multi-criteria mapping, MCM – was developed at the University of Sussex as a way to compare policy options. In the obesity study, MCM will be used to interview representatives of 20 different key stakeholder groups in each participating country. The categories will be the same for each country, and will include food producers (such as farmers and manufacturers), doctors, nutritionists, teachers, food retailers, advertisers, public policy-makers, consumer and sports organisations, self-help groups and members of the research and public-policy communities.

Each interviewee will evaluate policy options for addressing obesity, including six core options and up to six more of their own choice. Up to 12 evaluative criteria are also to be chosen by the

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What would stop you eating this?

AT A GLANCE

Official title
Policy options for responding to the growing challenge from obesity: a cross-national comparative study

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- *Finland: The UKK Institute for Health Promotion Research*
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interviewees who will rank each policy option for each criterion. A mathematical formula allows each interviewee's appraisal to be calculated and displayed as a bar chart. The interviewees can then review the findings, and reconsider or include new options or criteria if they wish.

Putting it all together

The data from all the stakeholder groups in each country will be reviewed by the national project teams, with the aim of finding out to what extent they can define a policy or collection of policies which might provide the most effective deterrent to obesity for that country. The national report for each country will draw out the main areas of agreement and disagreement in the perceptions of the different stakeholder groups, including both quantitative and qualitative responses.

> **PORGROW will define the policy or collection of policies which might provide the most effective deterrent to obesity.**

The final stage is to compare the national findings. The cross-national comparison should provide a reliable account of the policy options that could be available, and of the views of the key groups on these options. It should, therefore, give policy-makers the best possible basis for taking a decision on which policies, and combinations of policies, will be most effective and acceptable to the various groups.

PORGROW is a NEST INSIGHT project, so its function is to investigate growing problems which threaten European society. It will meet this objective directly by identifying appropriate policies to limit the effects of obesity. As well as national policy-makers, the outcome will also be of great relevance to the development of future EU food policy and legislation. More indirectly, PORGROW's use of MCM will demonstrate how the approach can be used on other complex multi-factorial problems in the future. The approach may be applied to many other situations where some of the factors are uncertain, thereby enabling policy-making to become more flexible and effective.

SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME