

Less-sweet drink policy and campaign—Thailand's success story

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Thailand is widely recognized for its high consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). Between 1990 and 2018, average consumption in the country increased considerably—from less than one serving per week to more than four servings weekly.¹ In 2019, the Office of the Cane and Sugar Board reported annual national sugar consumption at 2.5 million tonnes, equivalent to 25 teaspoons per person per day, 18 of which were attributable to SSBs.² This significantly exceeds the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommended daily limit of six teaspoons.³

In response to the WHO's strong recommendation to reduce excessive sugar consumption due to its adverse health effects—such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases⁴—Thailand introduced a tax on SSBs in 2017. Complementing this fiscal measure, the Department of Health (DOH) launched the “Less-Sweet Drink Policy and Campaign” in March 2020—a non-tax initiative designed to curb the overconsumption of SSBs. Given the critical role of multisectoral approaches—such as public-private partnerships—in the success of public health campaigns,⁵ the DOH collaborated with both public and private stakeholders, including the WHO Thailand and leading beverage franchises. The initiative targeted working age individuals (15–59 years), and focused on reducing sugar content in non-alcoholic beverages and implementing visible sugar-level labeling in cafés to encourage informed choices.

In April 2020, sales data on SSBs collected from 9674 participating cafés revealed that 32% of Thai consumers selected drinks with less sugar content. During the campaign's first phase (May–July 2020), the DOH partnered with cafés to co-develop low-sugar beverage recipes and introduced visual labels displaying sugar content. These labels ranged from 0% (no added sugar) to 100% (10 teaspoons per serving), with intermediate markers at 25% (2.5 teaspoons), 50% (5 teaspoons) and 75% (7.5 teaspoons). These signs, strategically placed in high-visibility areas, encouraged consumers to choose low-sugar options and make

healthier choices. After three months, sales data from participating cafés showed a significant shift, with 55% of consumers choosing low-sugar drinks—a notable increase from the initial 32%.

The initiative's second phase expanded on March 31, 2021, with additional large private sector businesses joining. By 2022, the third phase saw the development of “Wannoi” (wannoi means less sweet in English) mobile application and a database encompassing 25,000 franchise cafés and 2788 local beverage vendors nationwide. Between 2023 and 2024, partnership with online food delivery platforms, such as Robinhood and LINEMAN Wongnai, and prominent beverage franchises enabled the campaign to promote WHO-recommended standard level of ≤ 5 g of sugar per 100 ml. The campaign used targeted incentives, including discounts and complimentary offers (e.g., buy-one-get-one-free) to encourage the selection of low-sugar beverages—particularly those containing no more than 2.5 teaspoons of sugar per serving (200 ml)—and promote healthier consumer choices. Following these efforts, data from participating cafés in 2023 indicated that 57% of consumers chose low-sugar drinks. Moreover, online delivery platforms reported a 12.2 g reduction in average sugar content per drink.

This campaign has led to a significant drop in national sugar consumption. By 2023, annual sugar intake had declined to 0.8 million tonnes—a dramatic decrease from 2.5 million tonnes in 2019—equivalent to a daily sugar intake of 8 teaspoons per person.⁶ A recently published study by Thiboonboon et al.,⁷ conducted during the COVID-19 period, further confirmed this shift—only 15.8% of 49,128 adults reported daily SSB consumption, with an average intake of 85.2 ml per day. Additionally, “H4U Data 2024” from the Ministry of Public Health highlighted a growing selection for low-sugar beverages among Thai consumers, with the majority of adults (75%) choosing drinks with sugar levels between 0% and 75%, while 34.1% opted for beverages with only 0%–25% sugar content. This findings indicate that Thailand is on track to achieve its national goal of 90% of consumers choosing low-sugar beverages by 2027.

Building on the success of the “Less-Sweet Drink Policy and Campaign” in shifting consumer behavior and reducing sugar consumption, the DOH remains committed to expanding the initiative through sustained public-private partnerships—particularly within

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the digital ecosystem—and by strengthening data analytics to inform policy decision-making. The overarching goals are to encourage the consumption of beverages with 0%–25% sugar content and promote health literacy among the Thai population to reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases and improve long-term public health.

Contributors

Conceptualisation: SC, LR.

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Declaration of interests

The authors (SC, LR, SR, VT, and SMH) of this commentary declare no competing interests.

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