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**Report on the 1st Expert Stakeholder Group Virtual Meeting on the introduction of the LINKS Grant Project for the Monitoring and Evaluation of Salt Legislation in South Africa
1st March 2021 at 9 am**

A high level virtual meeting of experts was convened on 1 March 2021 to obtain buy-in and support for the project by the potential end-users.

Professor Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) welcomed everyone and reminded them who the consortium partners are that applied for the grant. The team was led by Professor Karen Charlton, from the University of Wollongong, Australia as the principal applicant. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the nature of the grant funding which specifically focuses on monitoring compliance with South Africa's salt reduction policies. Stakeholders from various relevant sectors, including the National Department of Health (NDOH) and industry representatives constituted the expert stakeholder group. The primary objective of the project is to make suggestions to the NDOH on the development of an Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) Framework for compliance to salt reduction legislation. Stakeholder input was highlighted as being extremely valuable in this process.

Dr Kathy Trieu from the George Institute for Global Health reported on salt reduction efforts globally and the progress made to date. In 2013 WHO set nine (9) voluntary global NCDs targets for 2025, one of which was to reduce sodium intake by 30% by 2025. According to Dr Trieu, other countries are looking to learn from South Africa's experience in both the implementation and evaluation of legislation.

Professor Karen Charlton, from the University of Wollongong, Australia explained the background to the Links project.

In conjunction with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of South Africa (HSFSA), through stakeholder engagement and co-design principles, the collaborators on the project, namely Univ of Wollongong, Heart & Stroke Foundation South Africa, Univ of Pretoria, and Discovery Vitality will identify a mechanism by which the South African government can monitor compliance of the food industry with the country's sodium policy.

Sodium content of key foods in seven (7) food categories included in the mandatory sodium reduction legislation will be chemically analysed using accepted methods by accredited laboratories. Values will be compared with sodium content information provided on food packaging labels -collected using the FoodSwitch smartphone application.

Novel data collected by the project will be used to develop a framework for monitoring the sodium content of the food supply in South Africa. These findings, in conjunction with input from the expert stakeholder group will inform development of a feasible and sustainable monitoring process, based on the WHO SHAKE Salt package, for uptake by the South African government.

Ms Terry Harris from Discovery Vitality discussed her role in the project which was to determine the salt content of packaged foods according to food labels using the FoodSwitch app.

Determining the salt content of foods through chemical analysis was presented by Dr Beulah Pretorius from the University of Pretoria. She explained that samples would be collected for key foods in 9 of the 13 food categories included in the mandatory sodium reduction legislation. Samples will be analysed using accepted accredited methods by laboratories that performed satisfactorily in a previous sodium inter-laboratory study.

Professor Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) described the Salt Watch Campaign which was funded by the NDOH and designed and implemented by the HSFSA in 2014. She also emphasized that the Foundation is well known for its emphasis on salt reduction efforts and continues to run campaigns for population level impact such as the NLC funded campaign in 2019. The key purpose of the campaign(s) is to drive behaviour change efforts for the reduction of sodium intake. The evaluation and impact of the Salt Watch Campaign was published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Break out Room Discussion Feedback

Group 1: Monitoring and Evaluation

Facilitators: Prof Pamela Naidoo, Prof Karen Charlton, Ms Kinza Hussain

The objective of the group was to discuss monitoring and evaluation of salt use and identify who is responsible for monitoring and evaluation of compliance with salt targets

Summary of recommendations:

- If we look at a certain product, usually, what is declared on the product and what is inside is not always the same so it is being questioned whether just relying on industry is good enough or not.
- There is unclear communication between government sectors, e.g. department of health and department of agriculture, which may sometimes result in double-costing. Suggestions were made for more clear communication between the two sectors.
- An idea would be to bring in the concept of salt testing, actual salt in the product. This may be associated with cost implications.
- Important to keep in mind is that shelf life is a main concern with these products, given the status of the majority of the population whereby they do not have refrigerators. This needs to be kept in mind if products are going to be changed to bring the salt levels down.
- It is necessary to focus on where monitoring should take place. Although it may be difficult to implement, the bottom end needs to be monitored, i.e. Spaza shops as these are most likely the places where the regulations are not followed. The main retailers like Pick 'n Pay and Woolworths may abide better to the regulations.
- Regulation 1283 was highlighted and is of importance for agriculture.

Group 2: Industry compliance

Facilitators: Dr Kathy Trieu, Dr Beulah Pretorius, Ms Terry Harris, Ms Hayley Cimring

The objective of the group was to discuss harnessing industry and how to promote food manufacturers to include foods with less salt.

Summary of recommendations:

Look beyond just 13 categories included in the regulations:

1. Include informal market (e.g. non-branded snacks high salt content sold to school kids)
 2. Restaurant industry
 3. Consider other / all sources of salt in the diet
- Should not only talk about reformulation, should talk about MONITORING that the industry should do on their products, should convince industry to do own monitoring and incorporate into a feedback system, duty of DoH to do some monitoring, is it happening?, should encourage a collaborative agreement between industry and DoH on how they will do the monitoring and feedback

- Monitoring / enforcement is the role of EHCs which are already overburdened and need to unpack detail for a workable solution how it fill it into overall monitoring plan
- Since we have legislation in the country, could we not include and explain the policy to the industry (focus on relevance and self-monitoring)
- Promote food industry and also adopt simpler FOP labeling on food products, 1 way to encourage food manufactures to make products with less salt
- Evidence that these policies are working is scant, hold the government to account - they wrote the food policy, government doing little, left to self-regulation since implementation of salt policy, is the question is about TARGETS or M&E??
- In this group we look to harness industry to get them not only to reformulate (legislative requirement) but how could they utilize this to promote their products e.g. processed meat industry similar to fortification logo if the product complies with regulations
- When we started with entire salt reduction big drive from industry not to indicate if a product was low salt or not based on market share low salt decreases sales, could be different, NDoH looking at FOP with Food Control will be interesting to see how we can work together – only 1 logo to indicate a more healthy product
- NDoH wants to adopt simple endorsement logo, explained HSFSA logo – easy to identify healthier product
- There is FOP work and consulting in next few months, researchers will present to different stakeholders
- When we talk about monitoring of products by INDUSTRY one thing to focus on nationals need to start looking at informal industry backyard guy own orange selling at school, no idea of salt content but have evidence that salt intake increasing in children
- Need to look at quick service restaurant regulations – the current regulations only include packaged foods
- When we started with this project 13 categories will expand and build out later on to restaurants needs to be considered later

The focus is not on the targets which have already been established but on implementation and looking further than the 13 categories because the problem is larger than that.

Closing and way forward

Prof Charlton closed the meeting with a vote of thanks to the presenters and participants and said that the report of the proceedings would be circulated to participants. A second meeting is planned for October depending on progress with data collection and analysis. The date will be communicated to the stakeholder group early so that attendance can be maximised.

Presenters

Dr. Kathy Trieu, The George Institute for Global Health, Australia
Prof Karen Charlton, University of Wollongong, Australia
Mrs Terry Harris, Discovery Vitality
Dr. Beulah Pretorius, University of Pretoria
Prof Pamela Naidoo, Heart and Stroke Foundation, South Africa

Other participants

Mr Nigel Sunley, Consulting and South African Association of Food Science and Technology
Mr Peter Gordan, CEO, South African Meat Processors Association
Prof Edelweiss Wentzel-Viljoen, North-West University, South Africa and HSFSA Board member.
Prof Hettie Schonfeld, University of Pretoria
Prof Andre Kengne, Head of Non-communicable Diseases at the Medical Research Council.
Prof Alta Schutte, University of New South Wales
Ms Prudence Cele, Health Promotions Officer, HSFSA
Hayley Cimring, Nutrition Team leader, Registered Dietitian, HSFSA
Kinza Hussain, Registered Dietitian, HSFSA

Mrs Sandhya Singh, Chief Director NCD's, National Department of Health, South Africa
Maude De Hoop, Nutrition, National Department of Health, South Africa
Dr Vicki Pinkney-Atkinson, Director of South Africa Non-communicable diseases alliance
Kelly Francis, Association of Dietetics, South Africa

Meeting ended at 10:30 am.