

There's no question that it's feasible:
New Zealand stakeholder attitudes on
taxing soft drinks



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The Problem

- ▶ Sugary drinks taxes are receiving increasing attention internationally as interventions to reduce morbidity and mortality from obesity & NCDs
- ▶ However, little is currently known about stakeholders' views about such initiatives, including in New Zealand.



Research Aim & Methods

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- ▶ To determine the feasibility and likely acceptability of a 20% tax on soft drinks in New Zealand over the next 5-10 years
- ▶ Conducted interviews with 20 key stakeholders including politicians; bureaucrats; & food industry, public health & consumer representatives





Results

Feasibility of NZ soft drink tax in next 5-10 years

OVERALL	Majority agreed	All, except the bureaucrats
Reason	Level of support	Comments
Tax	√	<p>General agreement feasible as soft drinks are not a core food & impact of tax limited to a small range of products</p> <p><i>“There’s no question that it’s feasible because government is able to impose an excise tax. It does it for other goods”</i></p>
Context	√	No major issues in the NZ context
Health equity	○	4 argued that the tax was regressive but there is much to be gained for health
Implementa- tion	○	A bureaucrat and food industry rep concerned administrative load high. Two advocates & politician not
Evidence	X	<p>Largely agreed that while evidence of effectiveness would be useful, thought there was little available</p> <p>A number noted the need to watch Mexico</p>

Acceptability of NZ soft drink tax in next 5-10 years

Stakeholder Group	Level of support	Comments
Public	√	<p>Majority agreed acceptable (n=7), or might be - if framed in a compelling way - (n=6)</p> <p>There is a shift in public opinion underway “<i>there’s a general increasing awareness about sugar and the contribution of sugar to obesity and diabetes</i>”</p>
Public Health	√	<p>General agreement that public health community supported it “<i>the public health and health professions are with one voice on this</i>”</p>
Industry	X	<p>Majority of stakeholders (3 food industry) agreed the tax not acceptable to food industry</p> <p>3 stakeholders, including 1 food industry rep, said it may be acceptable, noting the availability of alternative products. One bureaucrat noted industry opposition, “<i>might not be as strong as you think, given that there are good substitutes for sugar</i>”</p>

Acceptability of NZ soft drink tax in next 5-10 years

Stakeholder Group	Level of support	Comments
Bureaucrats	○	<p>Limited comment. However, as one bureaucrat noted <i>“if government departments know their ministers are philosophically opposed to something then they don’t push those ideas very hardso there is a bit of self-censoring”</i></p> <p>One public health expert argued <i>“I wouldn’t underestimate the opposition from the officials, but definitely the Treasury”</i></p>
Current Government	X	<p>No stakeholders thought the tax would be acceptable to the current Government. One consumer representative noted that <i>“they [industry] are incredibly influential and this government is persuaded by the arguments that they put up”</i></p>
Left leaning government	√	<p>8 stakeholders argued that a soft drink tax was possible with a change of Government to the left</p>

Stakeholders' views on tactics required

- ▶ Focus on a **SSB tax** – not just a soft drink tax
- ▶ “Someone needs to organise a **campaign** to build public support and work on susceptible politicians”
- ▶ Need **leadership** from paediatricians, child advocacy groups eg Plunket, Children’s Commissioner & Dental Association
- ▶ Frame as “**protecting the health of our children**”, including their **dental health**
- ▶ Use **international law** to support arguments – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- ▶ Ask politicians “Do you want **NZ to be the fattest nation** in the OECD?” – as that is where we are heading without concerted action





Conclusions

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- ▶ A SSBs tax is **feasible** and **likely acceptable** to key groups, including the public, in NZ in the next 5-10 years
- ▶ While this is a **small study** it included a **strategic sample** of key stakeholders
- ▶ WHO Commission calls for **government leadership** to end childhood obesity
- ▶ According to key stakeholders, a **tax on SSBs** can be part of the solution in New Zealand

