

## EDITORIAL

# 7 years gone, little action on Govt's 2017 plan on curbing ads for unhealthy foods

**Rema Nagarajan**

Times of India, Delhi

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Rema Nagarajan, Times of India, Delhi

Email: [reema.nagarajan@gmail.com](mailto:reema.nagarajan@gmail.com)

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There has been little or no action on key recommendations in gov't's 2017 action plan for prevention and control of common non-communicable diseases which seek strict regulation of advertising, marketing and promotion of unhealthy food to children. Seven years on, there is no regulation on what the plan described as "unchallenged aggressive marketing strategies" of food and beverage companies.

Promotion of unhealthy foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) came into focus recently

when Supreme Court talked of expanding a petition on Patanjali's misleading ads to include misleading ads "taking the public for a ride, in particular, adversely affecting health and well being of babies, young children, women... who have been consuming the products on the basis of misrepresentation".

National Multisectoral Action Plan-NMAP (2017-22) drawn up in Oct 2017 included enactment of laws and other regulatory measures, launching of IEC (information, education, communication) campaigns, formulation of appropriate policies, and so on for "reduction of risk factors levels in children, adolescents and adults". Unhealthy diet was one of the key risk factors identified and "change in lifestyle driven by unchallenged aggressive marketing strategies of unhealthy foods and beverages and alcohol industry" was identified as one of the challenges in bringing down NCDs.

The plan identified action points for 39 ministries/departments. Ministries of information and broadcasting (I&B), commerce, consumer affairs and food distribution, law and health were supposed to work together to regulate advertisement of demerit goods (like HFSS food products, alcohol, and tobacco) through “amendment of advertisement code of Cable Television Networks Rules and norms of journalist conduct; and Trademark Rules”.

Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) under health ministry was supposed to implement interpretative front of pack labelling and detailed nutrition labelling at the back of the pack.

“On prevention of NCDs, the national plan contains two key policy provisions — front of pack labelling and prohibition of advertisements of HFSS foods. Both require a definition of HFSS foods. India had a pretty good definition of HFSS in the 2018 draft regulation on front of pack labelling, which matches the definition used in Latin American countries and many other regions. But that

draft was dropped. The same definition is there in the Sept 2022 draft too. But after putting the draft in the public domain for comments, it seems to have gone into cold storage as nothing has moved since then,” said Dr Arun Gupta, who has filed several complaints regarding misleading ads for HFSS foods.

Other recommendations include regulation to promote reformulation of processed foods to limit the amount of fats, sugar and salt in such products by the food processing ministry and FSSAI, and “guidelines to prohibit sponsorship of sports events/teams/athletes by companies producing products that have negative health externalities” by sports ministry.

“We filed RTIs with several ministries but barring a few, most have not done much about the action plan and some were not even aware of it. In one of its responses, the health ministry claimed that there were regular meetings on the plan but failed to provide any minutes of the meetings,” said Dr Nupur Bidla, member of Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest, a national think tank on nutrition.