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For Consideration in The Lancet World Report Section

Israel Cancels Sweetened Beverage Tax in Setback to Public Health

Dear Editor, as members of the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) Non-Communicable Disease and Policy Working Groups, and other leading scholars of nutrition policy, health sciences and economics, we would like to convey extreme concern over the Israel's Finance Minister decision to revoke the sweetened beverage tax as the first act on his first day in office. ^{1,2}

This decision, taken without consulting the civil service professionals in the Ministry of Health or Finance, or conducting any other independent expert review is a grievous blow to public health. It runs counter to clear guidance from international agencies such as the World Health Organization,³ and the World Bank,⁴ as well as evidence from the Bank of Israel itself, showing that the tax significantly reduced sweetened beverage consumption.⁵

Revoking the tax will undoubtedly harm lives and increase the direct and indirect economic costs to Israel's health system and economy, both in the short and long term.⁶ More broadly, this act undermines hard won progress made elsewhere around the world. It is a serious setback for evidence-based public health policy and will be celebrated by vested interests that promote their products and disregard the need for policies that uphold the public's health and welfare.

This decision will be seen as prioritizing sectorial political interests over incontrovertible scientific evidence and public health best-practice. This seriously tarnishes Israel's international standing and leadership as a "light unto the nations" of medical, scientific and technological leadership and reputation as an exemplar of sensible, evidence-based policy.

We support our colleagues in the Israeli health professions and society at large in calling on the Government of Israel to reconsider and retract this ill-conceived and hasty decision. Instead, let the revenue from the soda tax be used to combat chronic diseases including obesity, as well as promote nutrition security by increasing economic access to healthy diets, narrowing health disparities, improving the health and welfare of all Israeli citizens, and setting an example for world health leadership.

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