

# October 2020



## CO-CREATE Youth Alliances' Policy Briefs

### Portugal

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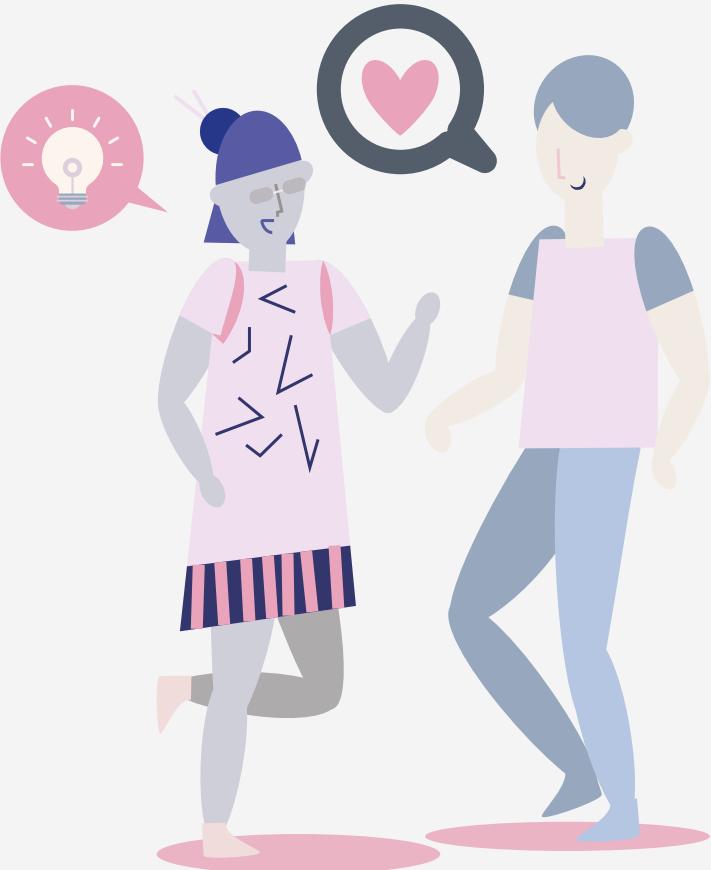
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# Introduction

CO-CREATE tackles the current gaps in obesity research by focusing on adolescents, their perspectives and the factors that influence their health. The project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme and led by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. It brings together 14 international research and advocacy organisations to work with young people to create, inform and promote policies for obesity prevention. CO-CREATE provides young people with the policy tools, knowledge and infrastructure they need to make the healthiest choices.

By working together in groups, known as alliances, young people participating in the CO-CREATE project have developed policy ideas to address the systemic factors which influence adolescent obesity and health in their respective countries. This brief summarises the policy ideas of CO-CREATE alliances in Portugal and outlines the steps they took to finalise their proposals. This brief aims to inform relevant stakeholders, such as policy- and decision-makers, about policies relevant for adolescents to tackle excess weight and obesity and to introduce a model on how to actively involve young people in the development of policies.



## Youth participation and co-creation

Young people are still rarely involved in addressing issues that are directly relevant to their lives.<sup>1</sup> Co-creation with adolescents through participatory action research has proved to be an effective tool for young people to tackle inequalities on various social issues, in particular those which directly affect them, such as health, and to successfully promote civic and political engagement among young people.<sup>2</sup>

# Portugal

## Summary of childhood obesity levels in Portugal

In 2019, the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity in Portugal was 29.6% and 12%, respectively.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, among Portuguese adolescents between 10 and 17 years old, the prevalence of overweight was 32.3%, while obesity prevalence was 8.7%. 36% of 15-21 year olds are considered physically active, according to the WHO recommendations.<sup>4</sup>



As far as dietary habits are concerned, adherence to the Mediterranean diet – which is rich in vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts, beans, cereals, grains, fish and unsaturated fats such as olive oil, with a low intake of meat and dairy products – is used as an indicator of a healthy diet. In Portugal, only 8.6% of adolescents reported that they strictly adhered to the Mediterranean diet; this figure was slightly higher among children aged 3-9 years (12.2%).<sup>5</sup>

## Childhood obesity level of the areas where the alliances were established

In Portugal, three alliances were established within the Lisbon and Tagus Valley (LVT) region in three municipalities: Lisbon, Cascais and Oeiras. Lisbon is the capital of Portugal, part of a metropolitan region with a population of 2.8 million people.<sup>6</sup> Cascais and Oeiras are cosmopolitan suburbs of the Portuguese capital with 206,479 and 174,249 inhabitants, respectively. In 2019, 29.5% of children in the LVT region were overweight, of whom 10.6% were obese.<sup>7</sup>

Data from the MUNSI programme in Cascais from 2020 concerning children aged 8 to 10 showed a prevalence of overweight in children of 39.3%. Cascais is a very dynamic and innovative municipality, and it has its own local health promotion strategy;<sup>8</sup> for example, health literacy activities and projects are organised in schools and the municipality is taking steps to improve food availability in schools and in municipal public spaces.

Data from the MUNSI programme in Oeiras from 2019 revealed a prevalence of overweight in children aged 8 to 10 of 24.7%.<sup>9</sup> The municipality of Oeiras is part of the Portuguese Healthy Cities Network,<sup>10</sup> an association of municipalities that are committed to the development of a healthy and balanced urban environment. No data are available regarding the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children in the Lisbon municipality. However, the municipality does have several health-promotion initiatives, such as "Vamos Todos ao Mercado"<sup>11</sup> (Let's go to the market) which gives all pre-schoolers and children in the 3rd and 4th years of primary school the opportunity to visit the local markets. Here they also learn all about healthy eating.

# METHODOLOGY

1. Based on Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR),<sup>12</sup> young people in CO-CREATE alliances were empowered to develop policy ideas to address the systemic issue of adolescent excess weight and obesity.
2. Supported by trained CO-CREATE country staff and assisted by co-facilitators from youth organisations, young people received information and training to help them develop and refine their policy proposals.
3. Using their newly acquired skills and knowledge, they held discussions, did research and worked with relevant stakeholders to finalise their ideas.
4. They met regularly over the course of several months, both in person and online.
5. Policy ideas were often reviewed and revised based on information gathered by alliance members after conducting their PAR activities.
6. The young people also participated in dialogue forums with relevant stakeholders; here, alliance members met with policy-makers and business leaders to discuss their policy ideas and translate them into possible action, follow-up measures or practical steps. Policy ideas were often then refined based on the knowledge gained at these forums.
7. The finalisation of the brief included a feedback round with some of the alliance members as well as input from the CO-CREATE task force; a small group consisting of representatives from alliances in different CO-CREATE implementing countries.



# CO-CREATE Oeiras Alliance's Policy Idea

## Limit the marketing of unhealthy food products



- Reduce marketing that encourages the consumption of unhealthy food and facilitate the marketing of healthy products
- Reduce the presence of unhealthy products at entrances, on the shelves and near the cash registers in commercial spaces
- Increase the price of shelf space for unhealthy products and reduce it for healthy products



### Summary of the policy

The policy idea is to change marketing in supermarkets so as to restrict marketing that promotes unhealthy food and to encourage marketing that promotes healthy food.

### The problem

The marketing of unhealthy food constantly influences and interferes with dietary choices. The more people are exposed to the marketing of unhealthy products, the more likely they are to buy those products. Nudging strategies used in the marketing of unhealthy products, for example, by organising the environment to subtly influence a person's behaviour, restrict freedom of choice and lead to excessive consumption of unhealthy food.



This is particularly the case in supermarkets, where unhealthy food products are displayed in strategic ways to encourage consumers to buy them. Permanent signage, advertisements and the ongoing use of promotional prices also often result in the purchase of unhealthy food. In Portugal, there is no authority to regulate this situation, not even at government level. Consequently, the food industry has a lot of freedom in this respect.

*The image above shows the Oeiras Alliance interviewing Samantha Nesrallah from EAT.*

### Activities youth undertook to develop the policy idea

1. The group used system mapping exercises to identify and connect various factors that contribute towards the issue of obesity in adolescents in their immediate environment.
2. This group decided to focus, among other things, on factors related to the marketing of unhealthy food products.
3. During the Photovoice activity, the group members took several photos, particularly of the supermarket aisles and shelves. They then used these photos to further develop their policy idea to address marketing in supermarkets and the way in which food products - especially the less healthy ones - are displayed in order to encourage purchases.
4. The group used WhatsApp to share materials and sources, such as e-books, on marketing restrictions and policies, which they then used to collect information to support their policy idea.
5. The group was eager to talk to an expert about their policy idea so as to gain a better understanding of how marketing works in supermarkets. They had a Zoom meeting with Samantha Nesrallah from EAT, one of CO-CREATE's partners. Samantha is an expert in nutrition policy and food marketing. This meeting provided the group with more information to support their policy idea.
6. By drawing on all these activities and experiences and inputs from CO-CREATE researchers, the group was able to refine its original idea and finalise the policy proposal.

# CO-CREATE Oeiras Alliance's Policy Idea

## Nutritionists in schools



- Have a nutritionist in schools to improve the food available in schools
- Increase young people's knowledge about food and nutrition
- Change eating habits while young



### Summary of the policy

This group from the Oeiras youth alliance proposes introducing nutritionists in schools to monitor and manage the range of food available at the canteens and cafeterias in and vending machines and to develop workshops and educational sessions with adolescent-friendly content about food and nutrition. This policy idea will also give young people easy access to a nutritionist when needed.

### The problem

Most schools have canteens, cafeterias and vending machines, but the type of food products available are not always healthy - neither are they the tastiest or the most visually attractive. As such, many students buy food in cafés outside school or go to fast food restaurants during their lunch break. This means, in turn, that they often eat foods which are high in sugar, salt and fat; in most cases, young people are not even aware of the effects that these products can have on their health.

Having a nutritionist in schools is therefore essential; they can manage the range of food available at school so as to make it more appealing and healthier, and they can also educate students about food and nutrition, allowing them to make more conscious and healthier choices.

### Activities youth undertook to develop the policy idea

1. The group used system mapping exercises to identify and connect various factors that contribute towards the issue of obesity in adolescents in their immediate environment.
2. This group decided to focus, among other things, on factors related to young people's lack of cooking skills and how this may influence dietary choices.
3. This group was particularly engaged during the photovoice activity. They took several photos, especially of what their peers ate at school. The photovoice activity confirmed their belief that nutritionists are needed in schools.
4. The members of this group participated in several Q&As. In these weekly sessions organised during the COVID-19 pandemic, alliance members had the opportunity to openly share their questions and ideas and to gather useful input from young professionals (23-30 year olds) with experience in several fields related to their policy ideas. The group was particularly active in the two Q&As which featured nutritionists (Joana Baleia and Helena Trigueiro).
5. The group used WhatsApp to share e-books on national and international policies and on the role of nutritionists in schools, which they then used to collect information to support their policy idea.
6. By drawing on all these activities and experiences, the group was able to refine its original idea and finalise the policy proposal.

# CO-CREATE Oeiras Alliance's Policy Idea

## Cooking classes at schools



- Improve young people's cooking skills by introducing cooking classes at schools
- Reduce the frequency with which young people go to fast food restaurants for meals.
- Promote healthier food choices among younger generations



### Summary of the policy

The policy idea is to provide cooking classes both at and outside school in order to encourage young people to cook their own food in a healthy way, thereby reducing the likelihood of eating fast food and buying ready-to-eat products.



### The problem

A busy lifestyle leaves little room to cook on a daily basis. Besides the lack of time, many young people do not know how to cook, so they often choose the unhealthy option or simply go to fast food restaurants. In the long term, these choices lead to health problems, and by the time these young people reach adulthood, they have few or no cooking skills and continue to buy ready-to-eat products and to go to fast food restaurants. That is why it is important to learn how to cook healthy food – and schools are great place to do that.

*The image above shows Oeiras alliance members doing a system maps activity*

### Activities youth undertook to develop the policy idea

1. The group used system mapping exercises to identify and connect various factors that contribute towards the issue of obesity in adolescents in their immediate environment.
2. This group decided to focus, among other things, on factors related to the consumption of fast food, the amount of time available, the number of fast food restaurants, cooking skills and home-made meals.
3. The group also completed a photovoice activity, where they took some photos to collect more information about their policy idea. They took photos in their school environment, and the results helped them to further develop their idea.
4. The group also had regular discussions with each other to help them fine-tune their idea; which is now geared towards young people by giving cooking lessons in schools.
5. The members of this group participated in several Q&As. In these weekly sessions organised during the COVID-19 pandemic, alliance members had the opportunity to openly share their questions and ideas and to gather useful input from young professionals (23-30 year olds) with experience in several fields related to their policy ideas. The group was particularly active in the two Q&As which featured nutritionists (Joana Baleia and Helena Trigueiro), during which the members asked a number of questions
6. The group used WhatsApp to share e-books on national and international policies and on the role of nutritionists in schools, which they then used to collect information to support their policy idea.
7. By drawing on all these activities and experiences, the group was able to refine its original idea and finalise the policy proposal.

# CO-CREATE Cascais Alliance's Policy Idea

## Physical activity for all



- Encourage young people to do more physical activity
- Improve the accessibility of sports centres and facilities



### Summary of the policy

This policy idea, physical activity for all, aims to create public-private partnerships between schools, city halls, gyms, sports clubs and public transportation companies to facilitate access to and the taking up of physical activity. An app will also be created to motivate young people; users will receive a prize for each goal achieved



### The problem

The prevalence of obesity and sedentary behaviours is worryingly high among young people in Portugal. In reality, adolescents are not as physically active as they could be. This may be due to a lack of initiatives, a lack of resources (transport and economic capacity) and a lack of motivation.

*The image above shows Cascais alliance members participating in a digital dialogue forum*

### Activities youth undertook to develop the policy idea

1. The group used system mapping exercises to identify and connect various factors that contribute towards the issue of obesity in adolescents in their immediate environment.
2. Further discussions between the group members resulted in a number of policy ideas to address these factors. The group then decided to focus on improving access to physical activity and motivating young people to be physically active.
3. The group gathered information from their surroundings through the photovoice activity; they took photos to learn more about young people's physical activity or lack thereof. They used the results to refine their idea.
4. They also conducted a survey among 179 people; 61% of the respondents were adolescents. The survey asked about physical activity habits and preferences. The used the results of this survey to further refine their idea.
5. The group also participated in several Q&As. In these weekly sessions organised during the COVID-19 pandemic, alliance members had the opportunity to talk to young professionals (23-30 year olds) with experience in several fields related to their policy ideas. During the Q&A with an expert in physical activity (Miguel Peralta), the group discussed the best approaches to motivate young people and also received information on evidence and research.
6. The group then discussed the idea in an online dialogue forum with relevant stakeholders, including a policymaker and an expert in physical activity. Issues were also identified which needed to be further developed by the group.
7. By drawing on all these activities and experiences and incorporating feedback from CO-CREATE researchers, the group was able to refine its original idea and finalise the policy proposal.

# CO-CREATE Cascais Alliance's Policy Idea

## Nutrition and Food Curriculum



- Promote the adoption of a healthy and informed diet among young people in their everyday lives.
- Demystify the difficulty and cost associated with healthy eating.
- Empower young people and increase self-confidence by improving their knowledge about nutrition and health and by developing cooking skills for a healthy diet.

### Summary of the policy

This policy idea is to incorporate nutrition and cooking themes in the Citizenship and Civic Education curriculum.

*"If we and our parents don't have time to cook, it is way easier to just open a pack of fries." - Portugal alliance member*

### The problem

A lack of cooking skills means that children and adolescents have an unhealthy diet because they constantly turn to fast food and other less nutritious food.

### Activities youth undertook to develop the policy idea

1. The group used system mapping exercises to identify and connect various factors that contribute towards the issue of obesity in adolescents in their immediate environment.
2. Further discussions between the group members resulted in a number of policy ideas to address these factors. This group decided to focus on improving adolescents' nutritional and health literacy and cooking skills.
3. The group gathered information from their surroundings through the photovoice activity; they took photos to gain a better understanding of the challenge of healthy eating among young people.
4. They then conducted a survey among 190 people, representing both adolescents and adults. The survey asked about the respondent's experience with the Citizenship and Civic Education subject at school and what they would like to see included as part of the curriculum.
5. The group also participated in several Q&As with young professionals (23-30 year olds) with experience in several fields related to the alliances' policy ideas. This group talked to two nutritionists and a psychologist (Joana Baleia, Helena Trigueiro and Andreia Pereira). They used these discussions to help them develop the content for and structure of the subject and to determine the age of the target group.
6. The group used WhatsApp to share materials and information, such as e-books, on national and international policies and on the role of nutritionists in schools, which they then used to collect more information to support their policy idea.
7. By drawing on all these activities and experiences, the group was able to refine its original idea and finalise the policy proposal, which was sent to CO-CREATE researchers for feedback.

# CO-CREATE Lisbon Alliance's Policy Idea

## School lesson to prepare for adulthood



- Introduce a standardised curriculum for Citizenship and Civic Education.
- Educate students on a wide variety of issues related to everyday life.



### Summary of the policy

The aim of the Lisbon Youth Alliance is to design a school subject which addresses practical everyday issues. To achieve this, the group proposes restructuring and standardising the Citizenship and Civic Education curriculum to include content about practical day-to-day activities and themes. This policy idea will result in a standardised curriculum, ensuring equality between all Portuguese students.

### The problem

The main purpose of the education system is to shape citizens who can make a positive contribution to society. In order to do this, it is essential that all students receive a proper education and training in a variety of subjects, from sexual education to healthy lifestyles. At present, however, Citizenship and Civic Education – unlike all other school subjects – does not have a standardised curriculum for all schools in Portugal to follow. This may result in considerable substantive differences between schools and students may never have the chance to learn about certain important topics at school, such as home economics and finances, the development of emotional skills and health management, since the topics covered in the class depends on the individual school.



*The image above shows the Lisbon alliance members having a group discussion in one of the alliance meetings*

### Activities youth undertook to develop the policy idea

1. The group used system mapping exercises to identify and connect various factors that contribute towards the issue of obesity in adolescents in their immediate environment.
2. Further discussions between the group members resulted in a number of policy ideas to address these factors. This group decided to focus on preparing young people for adulthood.
3. The group participated in several Q&As. The weekly sessions organised during the COVID-19 pandemic gave the alliance members the opportunity to openly share their questions and ideas and to gather useful input from young professionals (23-30 year olds) with experience in several fields related to their policy ideas. They used these sessions, particularly those with the two nutritionists and the psychologist, to gather relevant information for their policy.
4. The group used WhatsApp to share materials and information, such as e-books, on national and international policies and on the role of nutritionists in schools, which they then used to collect more information to support their policy idea.
5. By drawing on all these activities and experiences, the group was able to refine its original idea and finalise the policy proposal.

## **Follow-up**

On 1 October, a meeting with the group working on the 'Physical activity for all' policy idea took place to plan the next steps following the dialogue forum. Issues raised during this discussion needed to be deepened and clarified in particular.

The policy ideas regarding the school curriculum, both to restructure it and to design a new subject, add a different perspective to existing policies in Portugal. The topics of nutrition and food are not yet included in the compulsory school curriculum. Although there are some guidelines providing topics and approaches for integrating these issues into Portuguese education, they are voluntary. The three policy ideas, one from each alliance, all raise the same problem – a lack of nutrition literacy and cooking skills among adolescents – and all present possible solutions that could help to address this need, which the students involved in the project have also experienced themselves.

The 'Physical activity for all' policy idea is an innovative approach to increase free access to sports and other activities. The group also targeted its intervention towards young people's the lack of motivation to be physically active. Neither objective is fully addressed by existing policies, which leaves the door open for new perspectives and solutions to the issue of sedentarism among the young Portuguese population.

The policy idea to tackle marketing in supermarkets builds upon existing regulations that restrict the marketing of unhealthy products. This law addresses the marketing of unhealthy products to children under the age of 16, in school settings, on television, on the radio and via digital media. The idea put forward by this group goes a step further by proposing the restriction of such marketing supermarkets for all age groups. And finally, the policy idea of having nutritionists in schools is in line with the existing proposal put forward by the Order/Bar of Nutritionists that argues for the inclusion of nutritionists as part of the school staff in order to ensure a balanced and adequate food offer in schools.

# Resources

The policy ideas developed by the Youth Alliances engage with, build upon and are in line with existing policies regarding health and obesity in Portugal. Several relevant policies are listed below

1. The sugar tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (2018)<sup>13</sup>
2. The law No. 30/2019 that restricts all types of marketing aimed at children (2019)<sup>14</sup>
3. The ongoing reformulation of several food products in terms of salt, sugar and trans-fatty acids<sup>15</sup>
4. Guidelines for the school food supply, which limit the type of products available at the vending machines and cafeterias in schools (2012)<sup>16</sup>
5. The EU School, Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme (2017)<sup>17</sup>

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# Contact details

CEIDSS – Centre for Studies and Research in Social Dynamics and Health – is a non-profit research organization working in the area of health promotion focused on the social determinants of health and especially contributing for the reduction of health inequalities.

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