

Why is multi-stakeholder engagement important for childhood obesity policy?

Multi-stakeholder engagement refers to the joint collaboration of different actors to achieve a common goal. In the case of childhood obesity policy, this might involve a range of stakeholders (e.g., health, physical activity, the food sector) working towards equitable and sustainable solutions for childhood obesity. However, multi-stakeholder engagement also comes with substantial challenges and risks including governance and ethical issues, power imbalances, lack of trust, transparency, and issues regarding evidence base, sustainability, and equity. While these risks are well recognised, there is limited guidance on how multi-stakeholder platforms should be established and how they can operate with strong accountability to ensure meaningful improvement of childhood obesity policy.



STOP project findings: Mini-summary

- **The main European Union (EU) multi-stakeholder platforms and individual stakeholders** considered relevant for childhood obesity policy were mapped using the welfare mix triangle and the obesity system influence diagram. Overall, it was found profit making formal private organisations (e.g., economic stakeholders) have the strongest presence on EU platforms. Not all types of stakeholders, in particular the non-formal ones, are represented at an EU level, which means that certain views and approaches may be absent from EU debates (1).
- **The STOP project partners encouraged stakeholder engagement** through surveys and dialogues. Invited stakeholders took part in two surveys conducted in 2019 (Year 1) and 2021 (Year 3). In addition, four stakeholder dialogues were conducted, which added important topics and concepts to the two surveys. Overall, findings from the four STOP stakeholders' dialogues and two stakeholders' surveys stressed holistic and interdisciplinary approaches, as well as increased cooperation between stakeholder groups as important for effective multi-stakeholder engagement (2) (3).
- **Accountability** refers to "the principle that individuals, organizations and the community are responsible for their actions and may be required to explain them to others". Accountability mechanisms can aid the management of governance and ethical issues, lack of trust, transparency and evidence, low sustainability, and inequity. The STOP project explored and reviewed existing accountability mechanisms to provide evidence for the recommendations of a mechanism for the EU childhood obesity multi-stakeholder platform (4).

STOP publications are referenced (1-4)

Implications of findings for policy design

The research led to the development of a set of recommendations and a practical checklist with criteria to inform the establishment of multi-stakeholder platforms, along with guidance on how to ensure strong accountability (see www.stopchildobesity.eu.)

The recommendations should be considered for incorporating into multi-stakeholder initiatives established under the [EU's Farm to Fork Strategy](#), [Europe's Beating Cancer Plan](#), and the [EU Non - Communicable Disease Initiative](#).



i Esping-Andersen G (1990). The three worlds of welfare capitalism. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

ii Pestoff VA (1992) Third sector and co-operative services. An alternative to privatization. Journal of consumer policy 15(1):21-45.

iii FORESIGHT (2007) Tackling Obesity: Future Choices - Project Report. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-obesity-future-choices>.

iv Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Public Health Strategies to Improve Health. 2011. Measurement and accountability. Washington, D.C., DC: National Academies Press.

Multi-stakeholder engagement can be a double-edged sword. Diverse contributors can add real value to finding solutions, whilst also posing substantial challenges and risks. STOP has proposed criteria for setting up accountable, multi-stakeholder initiatives with a solid basis.



For more information, visit www.stopchildobesity.eu or scan the QR code



Stakeholder mapping ⁽¹⁾

The first objective for STOP project partners was to identify EU stakeholder platforms and individual stakeholders that have relevance to the prevention of childhood obesity.

Each of the selected platforms is presented and described in accordance with five key characteristics: (a) platform aims, (b) working method, (c) types of outputs, (d) membership structure, and (e) level of evaluation.

For both EU platforms and the individual stakeholders special attention was given to the (d), membership structure (the types of stakeholders that are represented). The membership structure is described in accordance with two classification systems, the first being the 'welfare mix triangle' (fig. 1) and the second, the 'obesity system influence diagram' (fig. 2)

The Welfare mix triangle (fig.1) provides a framework to identify which types of societal actors and which spheres of society are represented in a platform. The obesity system influence diagram (fig 2) allows a perspective on the types and content of activities carried out by involved actors in relation to factors influencing obesity.



Figure 1. Welfare mix triangle (Esping-Andersen, 1990, Pestoff, 1992).

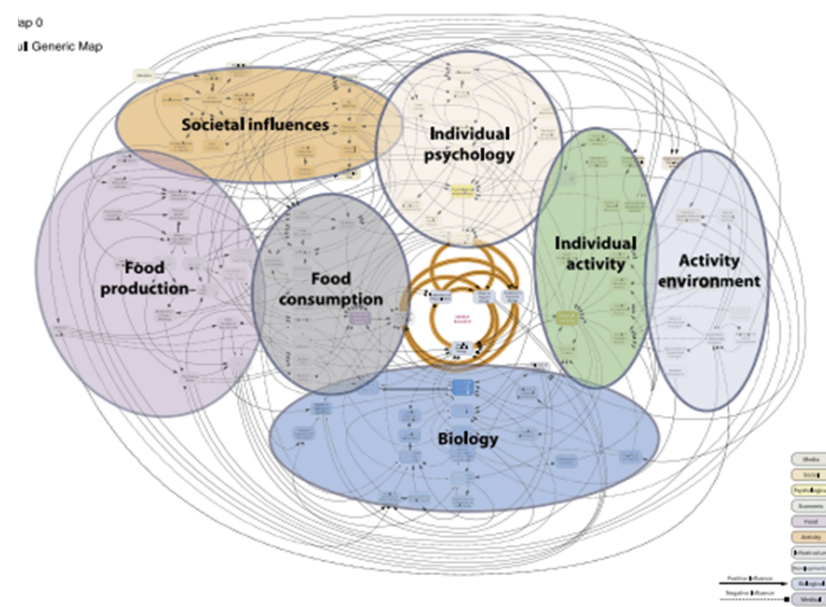


Figure 2. Obesity system influence diagram.(Foresight, 2007).

The key findings for multi-stakeholder platforms and individual stakeholders are:

Multi-stakeholder platforms:

- Based on the welfare triangle, membership of multi-stakeholder platforms was predominantly composed of profit-making private formal organisations, non-profit formal organisations, and non-profit public formal organisations.
- Based on the obesity system influence diagram, members of the multi-stakeholder platforms were identified as having their main interests in the fields of food consumption, individual activity, societal influences, and food production.

Individual stakeholders:

- Based on the welfare triangle, most of the identified individual stakeholders were in the non-profit formal organisation sphere.
- Based on the obesity system influence diagram, individually identified stakeholders were identified as having their main interest in the fields of biology (including health), societal influences and food consumption.

Overall:

- The existing multi-stakeholder platforms generally include the main actors active at EU level.
- Profit-making private formal organisations (organisations representing economic operators) appear to have a stronger presence in the platforms.
- The societal influence field of biology, while strongly represented among the identified individual stakeholders, is less represented as a topic in multi-stakeholder platforms.
- Not all types of stakeholders, in particular the non-formal ones, are represented at an EU level, which means that certain views and approaches may be absent from EU debates.

Stakeholder perspectives ^{(2) (3)}

The second objective for STOP project partners was to encourage stakeholder engagement, facilitated through surveys and dialogues.

The list of stakeholders invited to the surveys was jointly composed by the STOP project's research group co-ordinators and other representatives. The aim was to address as many relevant stakeholders as possible, as well as stakeholders who are not normally included in debates. To ensure this was successfully achieved, a structured approach was adopted utilising the obesity system influence framework diagram (fig. 2) and the welfare mix diagram (fig. 1).

Invited stakeholders took part in two surveys conducted in 2019 (Year 1) and 2021 (Year 3). In addition, four stakeholder dialogues were conducted, which added important topics and concepts to the two surveys. The final objective was to provide recommendations for the effective establishment of EU multi-stakeholder platforms, and for monitoring of existing processes. The stakeholder engagement process is demonstrated in figure 3.

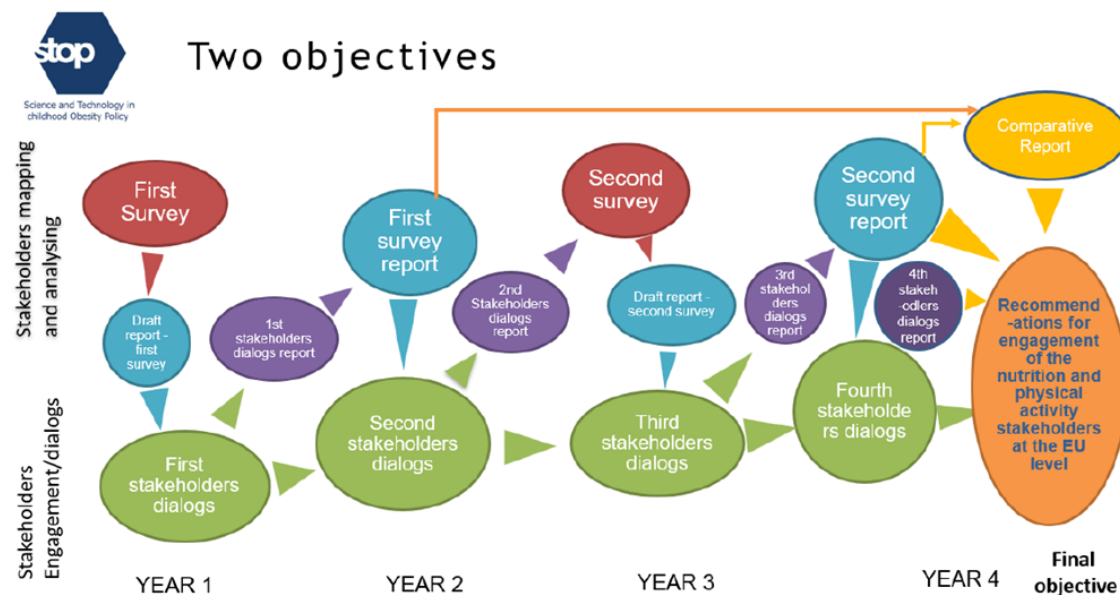


Figure 3. The stakeholder engagement process

The two web surveys conducted involved questionnaires, of which **table 1** below shows the key findings.

Table 1: Key findings from surveys

Key findings first survey	Key findings second survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholders considered food labelling and food marketing as the most promising interventions for adapting obesogenic environments, with food taxation the least promising. More than half of stakeholders thought social media campaigns were successful with physical activity campaigns the most successful and targeting portion size the least. Nearly half considered monitoring business actions and performance important. The importance of involving the food industry was stressed, but there was concern over conflicts of interest. Physical activity policies were well supported across stakeholder groups. A main challenge for healthcare was a lack of education, training in weight management, financing, and a lack of teamwork. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only a few stakeholders perceived themselves as having above average power in the childhood obesity policy sphere. Most thought they had a moderate amount of influence, predominantly at a national level. Academia is perceived as the most trustworthy stakeholder, followed by non-governmental organisations. The private sector and media were perceived as most likely to pursue their own goals and agendas, as well as exploiting collaborating organisations for their own benefit. Evidence and transparency were highlighted as key for trust. Sustainability was high on the agenda of all organisations. The agri-food industry was perceived as the least collaborative. The health sector and research were very collaborative.

Overall, findings from the four STOP stakeholders' dialogues and two stakeholders' surveys stressed holistic and interdisciplinary approaches, as well as increased cooperation between stakeholder groups as important for effective multi-stakeholder engagement. Also, findings broadly called for the development of recommendations for sustainable accountability mechanisms.

Accountability framework ⁽⁴⁾

Multi-stakeholder platforms can have benefits such as co-creation of knowledge, strengthened advocacy, the ability to foster long-term relationships, and facilitated dialogue for teamwork. However, platforms can have challenges such as power imbalances, and different values and goals between stakeholders. A way of counteracting these challenges is to have a mechanism that provides guidance for multi-stakeholder conduct, such as an accountability mechanism. Accountability refers to “the principle that individuals, organizations and the community are responsible for their actions and may be required to explain them to others.” (i) Accountability mechanisms can aid the management of governance and ethical issues, lack of trust, transparency and evidence, low sustainability, and inequity. They need to be implemented to ensure each stakeholder is responsible and can be held responsible for their actions.

The STOP project explored and reviewed existing accountability mechanisms to provide evidence for the recommendations of a mechanism for the EU childhood obesity multi-stakeholder platform. A scoping review was conducted, including 20 existing global, European, national, and local mechanisms, as well as the principles of accountability that underpin INFORMAS, an existing accountability mechanism (ii). In addition, STOP also reviewed evidence on how to ensure an accountability mechanism will be sustainable.

The recommendations were made to inform a practical checklist with criteria to guide the establishment of a multi-stakeholder platform, along with guidance on how to ensure strong accountability and determine the role of different stakeholder groups within these.

The checklist and guidance may be useful for anyone looking to establish effective multi-stakeholder actions, including national governments and the European Union. It may also be valuable to those looking to assess or monitor existing processes to ensure that they are established in such a way that supports rather than undermines policy, minimises risk of conflicts of interest, incorporates strong accountability mechanisms, and are sustainable.

(i) Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Public Health Strategies to Improve Health. 2011. Measurement and accountability. Washington, D.C., DC: National Academies Press

(ii) Swinburn, B. et al. (2015) “Strengthening of accountability systems to create healthy food environments and reduce global obesity,” *Lancet*, 385(9986), pp. 2534–2545. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61747-5



Future research priorities

The findings from the STOP project have provided new evidence and insights on multi-stakeholder engagement for effective childhood obesity policy. Further research opportunities identified include:

- how to promote engagement from the environment, transport, finance, and labour sectors in multi-stakeholder platforms, as well as ‘the rights holders’ i.e. those meant to benefit from multi-stakeholder actions for childhood obesity.

STOP publications (see www.stopchildobesity.eu for an up-to-date list)

1. Pushkarev, N, Gabrijelčič M, Sotlar M, Kronegger L. D10.1: Short Overview of the STOP stakeholder’s methodology, identification process and initial analytical outcomes. 2019. (<http://www.stopchildobesity.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/D10.1.pdf>).
2. Gabrijelčič M, Kronegger L, Robnik M, Pushkarev N, Neveux M, Stolar I. D10.2: Social Network Analysis Report. 2020. <http://www.stopchildobesity.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/D10.2.pdf>.
3. Kronegger K., et al. D10.3: Web questionnaire, comparative final report. 2020.
4. Gabrijelčič et al. D10.4: STOP accountability framework, final report for stakeholders engagement in the areas of nutrition, physical activity and childhood obesity at the EU level, with recommendations.