



CEFS' EVENT REPORT



**Taxation or Transformation?
Re-evaluating the Role of Sugar
Taxation in Europe's Health Strategy**

On Thursday 23 April 2026, in the European Parliament, CEFS in cooperation with SME Connect, organised a debate on “Taxation or Transformation? Re-evaluating the Role of Sugar Taxation in Europe’s Health Strategy”, hosted by MEP Kristian Vigenin (ENVI & SANT Committee) and moderated by Dr. Horst Heitz, Chair of the Steering Committee at SME Connect.

The event brought together a diverse panel of experts from academia, industry, and policy, including Prof. dr. ir. Frans Kok (Chair of the Scientific Advisory Board, Cosun Nutrition Centre), Annie Denny (CEO, World Sugar Research Organisation), Marie-Christine Ribera (Director General, CEFS), Bo Dohmen (Senior Manager Nutrition & Health, FoodDrinkEurope), and Pietro Paganini (Co-Founder, Competere).



Kristian Vigenin

MEP, ENVI & SANT Committee



Marie-Christine Ribera

Director General, CEFS



Prof. dr.ir. Frans Kok

Chair of Scientific Advisory Board,
Cosun Nutrition Center



Annie Denny

CEO, World Sugar
Research Organisation



Pietro Paganini

Co-Founder of Competere



Bo Dohmen

Senior Manager Nutrition & Health,
FoodDrinkEurope



Horst Heitz

Chair of Steering Committee,
SME Connect



MEP Kristian Vigenin opened the debate by highlighting the growing public health challenges linked to obesity and non-communicable diseases across Europe. He stressed the responsibility of policymakers to design policies that are effective, proportionate, and socially fair, raising questions about the appropriateness of fiscal measures such as sugar taxation. He also pointed to the potential regressive impact on low-income households of such policies and called for a balanced, evidence-based and holistic approach.

Dr. Horst Heitz, guided the discussion by fostering an open and balanced exchange, encouraging reflection on the effectiveness and limitations of sugar taxation. He underlined the importance of questioning single-measure approaches and ensuring that policy responses are grounded in evidence while taking into account broader economic and societal implications.

Prof. Frans Kok, provided a scientific perspective, explaining the role of sugars in the diet and in food production. He noted that scientific evidence does not establish a clear tolerable upper intake level for sugars and highlighted that experiences in countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands show no link between sugar taxation and reductions in obesity. He argued that focusing on a single nutrient is insufficient and advocated for comprehensive strategies, including improved food environments and lifestyle education.



Annie Denny, emphasised that obesity is a multifaceted issue influenced by a range of factors beyond diet alone. Referring to UK data, she noted that sugar intake had already been declining prior to taxation and that reductions linked to such measures represent only a small share of overall caloric intake, while obesity rates continue to rise. She questioned the effectiveness of fiscal measures and highlighted the importance of broader strategies addressing dietary patterns, physical activity, and evolving consumer preferences, including a growing demand for natural ingredients, clean labelling, and reduced reliance on artificial sweeteners.

Marie-Christine Ribera, stressed that there is no conclusive scientific evidence demonstrating that sugar taxes reduce obesity. She warned against oversimplifying a complex issue driven by multiple factors and highlighted concerns about the regressive nature of such taxes. She called for more inclusive approaches focused on nutrition education, clear labelling, and the promotion of physical activity.



Bo Dohmen, addressed the issue from an industry perspective, recognising the need to tackle diet-related diseases while questioning the effectiveness of taxation. She highlighted potential unintended consequences and noted that reduced consumption of specific products does not necessarily lead to healthier diets. She pointed to ongoing industry efforts and called for policies that promote positive food environments and stronger evidence through improved EU-wide data.

Pietro Paganini, offered a broader reflection, noting that sugar has become a symbolic and polarising issue in public health debates. He warned against “demonising” a single nutrient and stressed the importance of focusing on overall dietary patterns, lifestyle, and individual behaviour. He advocated for approaches that empower consumers through education and informed choice.

The discussion highlighted a broad consensus that obesity and diet-related diseases are complex and cannot be effectively addressed through single-policy instruments such as taxation. Speakers stressed the limited and inconclusive evidence regarding their impact on overall health outcomes. The debate concluded with a call for more comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to public health, focusing on education, improved food environments, and the promotion of balanced lifestyles. Participants agreed on the need to move beyond single-nutrient approaches and address the full complexity of dietary behaviours and health outcomes to deliver sustainable and equitable results for European citizens.