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*Social inequalities in the consumption of artificial
beverages in Argentina: existing regulations and possible
measures*

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1. Introduction

Social class, in interaction with gender, ethnicity, and age, is a structural determinant in access to and choice of food (Smith Maguire, 2016). Food practices are a powerful creator of gender and social position differentiation (Bourdieu, 1988), and an intermediary determinant of the relationship between social inequalities and the health of the population (WHO, 2010).

In the case of Sugar-Sweetened Beverages¹ (SSBs), their consumption is associated with nutritionally unbalanced diets, overweight and obesity, type 2 diabetes, liver disease, cardiometabolic disease, and osteoporosis, other chronic non-communicable diseases, and dental caries (Popkin, 2012; PAHO, 2019; Lara Castor et al., 2025).

The consumption of SSBs in Argentina, particularly soft drinks, became massive in the 60s, and is currently among the highest in the world (Baritoli, Elorza, & Geri, 2020; Alcaraz et al., 2020). While in high-income countries the consumption of SSBs increased until the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the market diversified with the offer of artificial beverages with lower sugar content and non-caloric artificial sweeteners; in Argentina, as in other low- and middle-income countries, its consumption continued to increase (PAHO, 2019).

In relation to Artificial Sugar-Sweetened Beverages (ASSBs), and especially diet soft drinks, these represent the main consumption of products containing non-caloric or low-calorie artificial sweeteners worldwide (Sylvetsky & Rother, 2016, p.3). Artificial sweeteners were originally included in the diets of people with diabetes, but their use became widespread for the prevention of overweight and obesity. Controversies about the possible adverse health effects of prolonged use of some sweeteners, and in excessive quantities, accompanied their dissemination on a global scale (De la Peña, 2010) and in Argentina (Freidin, 2016). In 2023, a WHO report (2023) received extensive press coverage, whose conditional², inconclusive guideline was that "sugar-free sweeteners should not be used as a means of weight control or reduction of the risk of non-

communicable diseases (conditional recommendation)" (WHO, 2023, p.7)

Below, we summarize the sociodemographic patterns of SSBs and ASSBs consumption of the adult population in urban areas of Argentina based on data from the National Nutrition and Health Survey (ENNyS) 2018/19. We also review the existing regulations and public policies in the country, as well as the recommendations of international organizations and the experiences of other countries for the regulation of sale and consumption.

2. Analysis³

Frequency of consumption of SSBs Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

According to data from the ENNyS 2018/19, approximately one third (32.9%) of people consume SSBs daily, another third do so one to six times a week (32.5%) and the remaining third less than once a week (34.5%). The frequency of consumption decreases as the age group increases and among women. It is also higher among the low-income population (educational and family income), who live in homes whose water supply is not piped inside the house, and belong to households with children. In turn, daily consumption is lower among those with diabetes and/or dyslipidemia, high cholesterol or triglycerides (health conditions that require a carbohydrate-restrictive diet). Finally, there are differences between regions, with higher consumption in the Northwest. It should also be noted that the multivariate analysis shows, on the one hand, that all variables continue to have an effect once the rest of them have been controlled; and on the other, that the effect of gender decreases in the elderly population, and that of the age group among women (Ballesteros et al, 2023).

Frequency of consumption of ASSBs Artificial Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

In relation to ASSBs consumption, the 2018/19 ENNyS data show an inverse pattern to that of SSBs for most variables, although with a considerably lower frequency of consumption (71.2% of the population consumes ASSBs less than once a week, compared to 34.5% of SSBs). Consumption is more frequent among those with higher levels of education and income, belong to older age groups, and those who have any of the health

small. Therefore, substantive discussion among policymakers may be necessary before a conditional recommendation can be adopted as policy" (WHO, 2023, p. 8).

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¹ Sugar-Sweetened Beverages (SSBs) include non-alcoholic beverages such as sodas, powdered or concentrated juices, flavored waters, energy drinks, and sports drinks

² "Conditional recommendations are those for which the WHO Guideline Development Group is least certain that the desirable consequences of their implementation outweigh the undesirable ones, or those whose expected net benefits are very



conditions surveyed. In addition, it is slightly more frequent among women and among those living in households without children under 14 years of age. The frequency of consumption also increases among those who reside in Greater Buenos Aires and in homes with piped water supply within them. It should be noted that the results of the multivariate analysis show that, once the health condition is controlled, the effect of the age group is no longer significant. In other words, there are no differences in consumption according to age between both those who have any of the chronic conditions and those who do not report them. The rest of the variables continue to have a significant effect (Ballesteros et al., 2023).

3. Current regulations and recommendations

Current regulations in Argentina

It should be noted that the data analyzed are from the years 2018 and 2019, and that during 2022 the National Law on Healthy Eating (27,642) was regulated and began to be implemented⁴, which establishes the incorporation of warning seals on packaged foods and beverages if they contain critical nutrients in excess (sugars, sodium, saturated fats, total fats and calories). It also prohibits the advertising and promotion of products aimed at children and adolescents that contain at least one warning seal, as well as their marketing in educational settings. Regarding artificial sweeteners, it establishes the inclusion of a precautionary front legend: "contains sweeteners, not recommended in children". A survey conducted by the Ministry of Health (2023) showed that 43.6% of people take the seals into account when deciding which products to buy, a percentage that increases among women and those with university studies, while it decreases among young people (18 to 29 years old). That is, the population groups that consume ASSBs to a greater extent and to a lesser extent SSBs according to the ENNyS, are the ones who most frequently reported taking into account the seals when making purchases in the Ministry of Health survey.

Argentina, however, lags behind other countries in the region (such as Mexico, Chile, and Ecuador) in tax policies to discourage SSBs consumption. There is currently an 8% tax in the country on non-alcoholic beverages, syrups, extracts and concentrates, which is reduced to 4% when it comes to flavored waters or non-alcoholic beverages made with a minimum of 10% fruit juices (Baritoli et al., 2020). In 2017, a bill proposed taxing artificially added sugar in non-alcoholic beverages. The rates would be increased to 17% for those beverages with

free sugars artificially added in the production process, while beverages without added sugar in the production, or products that use the sweetness of natural juices in higher concentrations and do not contain artificially added sugars would not be reached by the tax (it would go to 0%). This law did not achieve approval, so there are currently no tax differences depending on whether or not a beverage contains added sugar (Barraud & Cristina, 2021).

Public policy proposals

International organizations propose several state interventions to reduce the consumption of SSBs that include tax policies, information campaigns, the introduction of front-of-pack labeling, and the regulation of school environments (WHO, 2023; PAHO, 2019).

It should be noted that the National Law for the Promotion of Healthy Eating (27,642) represented an important advance in this line, although it is necessary to have more studies on its impact on the consumption of SSBs, considering the short time that has elapsed since its implementation (Britos, 2024). Taking into account that it is the population that consumes SSBs the least according to the ENNyS (women, people over 30 years of age, and those with university studies) that pays the most attention to the seals according to the Ministry of Health's survey (see also Malzoni and Secchi, 2024), it is possible that the effect of the Law is limited (since those who pay more attention already bought these products less) or that the differences between the groups have increased (since those who would have changed their habits to a greater extent are those who consumed the least).

While some surveys show a high level of awareness of the existence of the seals and their understanding (Malzoni & Secchi, 2024), qualitative studies indicate that the seals can generate confusion, especially if they contain products recommended as healthy, typically dairy, and that for this reason massive public food education campaigns are demanded (Freidin et al., 2024). In fact, experts point out that information campaigns are a key element for the effectiveness of front-of-pack labeling policies (Roberto et al., 2021)

In relation to tax burdens, the case of Mexico shows the importance of this type of policy to discourage the consumption of SSBs, particularly in the low-income population. PAHO (2020: 6) notes that after the implementation of a SSBs tax, there was a reduction "of 5.5% in sales at the end of the first year and 9.7% in the

regulations to consider only added critical nutrients and not those intrinsic to food.

⁴ The obligation to incorporate warning seals was gradual, and became mandatory for all companies in the second half of 2023. In December 2024, changes were made to the Act's



second year, with a greater decrease in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged households" (see also López-Olmedo et al., 2018). It is expected that, from the implementation of a special tax on SSBs, a reduction in their consumption will be generated in general and particularly among the low-income population. In this way, the tax would improve the population's diet and reduce inequalities in consumption. The PAHO document (2019) also points out that the higher tax burden has led the industry in several countries to reformulate artificial beverages with less added sugar.

While in Mexico a fixed rate was proposed for the consumption of sugary drinks (1 peso per liter), for Argentina, taking into account the country's inflationary history, it would be convenient to incorporate a percentage into the purchase price. International evidence indicates that for the policy to be effective, the increase in the price for sale to the public must be at least 20% (IECS, 2019). Another complementary option to the previous one is that the tax levy varies depending on the amount of sugar (as in Chile and Ecuador) (see IECS, 2019). Although consumption taxes tend to generate resistance in the population, a 2018 national survey found that about half of the population would agree to a tax on SSBs (a percentage that increases with higher educational level and income) (Ministry of Health and Social Development, 2019, p. 104).

On the other hand, the population that does not supply water by pipes inside their homes consumes SSBs to a greater extent. This is to be expected, because the greater difficulties in consuming water in the home encourage the consumption of packaged beverages (Lara-Castor et al., 2025). It is highlighted that, in the multivariate analysis, when controlling for the effect of income and educational level, the association between this characteristic of housing and the frequency of consumption of both types of beverages persists (Ballesteros et al., 2023). In this sense, the importance of guaranteeing this basic habitat resource is highlighted, considering that access to safe drinking water is a fundamental human right (UBI-UNDP, 2023), and that the results of the ENNyS show that the population that does not have this resource consumes more SSBs. Difficulties in accessing drinking water inside the home are associated with higher morbidity and mortality due to infectious and parasitic diseases, mainly in children under 5 years of age (WHO, 2008). The results of the ENNyS show another facet of the importance of implementing public policies that guarantee access to this basic resource. According to data from the latest National Census of Population, Households and Housing carried

out in 2022, 7% of the population (approximately 3.2 million people) belongs to households that cannot be supplied with water from pipes inside the home. It is added that 16% of the population does not access water from the public network (running water) but through pump drilling, wells, transport by cistern, etc.⁵, and that studies carried out in the country show that part of this supply is not suitable for human consumption due to microbiological contamination and/or high levels of nitrates (Assandri et al., 2023).

As for ASSBs, their higher consumption in the population with greater resources coincides with international precedents (Sylvetsky & Rother, 2016), a phenomenon that is related to their promotion as healthier options compared to SSBs. This is also linked to the ability of households with higher purchasing power to diversify their food diet (Arrieta et al., 2020). However, uncertainty remains about how ASSBs consumption will evolve in the future, especially with the media coverage in Argentina of the potential health risks of artificial sweeteners. If more scientific evidence is collected and disseminated, it is expected that ASSBs consumption patterns will change. Following Phelan et al. (2010), it is likely that groups with greater economic and educational resources reduce the consumption of these beverages to prevent risks, as part of their healthier lifestyles.

4. Brief conclusion: recommendations to reduce consumption and reduce inequalities

The high consumption of SSBs by the urban population in Argentina is a problem for public health, and an intermediary determinant of social inequalities in health. The data presented shows the need to develop public policies that collaborate in reducing their consumption and in addressing the inequalities they generate in health. Based on the experience of other countries and the recommendations of international agencies, measures should include:

-Mass information campaigns that accompany the National Law for the Promotion of Healthy Eating (27,642), which help to interpret the front seals and inform about the negative health consequences of SSBs consumption.

-The incorporation of a tax levied on the consumption of SSBs, which implies an increase in the sale price of at least 20%. This measure would help reduce the inequalities generated by the consumption of SSBs, since it is expected that it will be the lowest-income population

⁵ Own elaboration data from <https://redatam.indec.gob.ar/>



that will stop consuming SSBs to a greater extent if the tax is incorporated.

- Guarantee access to drinking water inside the homes of all households in Argentina. This health infrastructure policy would contribute to reducing the consumption of SSBs in the low-income population, in addition to having an impact on the reduction of inequalities in morbidity and mortality due to other problems.

Likewise, national studies are necessary to evaluate the impact of the National Law for the Promotion of Healthy Eating (27,642) on the consumption of SSBs and ASSBs.

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