

# **Sweet and Sour? Policy Entrepreneurship and the Case of the Food Labelling Law in Israel**

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## **Abstract**

Globally, doctors have been warning policymakers and the public about the dangers of consuming products high in saturated fat, salt, and sugar, which contribute to obesity and various diseases. Consequently, numerous countries have adopted policies aimed at reducing the consumption of such products. This issue sparked public debate in Israel when, in 2016, the Israeli Minister of Health announced: "McDonald's out! Not in our country" and declared these products as the new "public enemies." This proclamation ignited a political struggle over product labeling, involving politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups, and the public. In 2017, the Knesset enacted a law mandating Front-of-Pack (FoP) food labeling (red stickers on packaging). Drawing on policy entrepreneurship literature and John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model, and utilizing semi-structured interviews alongside written data sources, this research seeks to apply Kingdon's model to explain the different streams that led to the law's enactment. within this context, the study also highlights the crucial role of the Director General of the Ministry of Health as the policy entrepreneur in promoting the FoP labeling of these products, while raising public awareness about the potential health risks of consuming unhealthy food.

**Key words:** Policy Entrepreneurship, Policy Change, Food Labeling, Agenda-Setting, MSF, Health Policy

## **Introduction**

Experts the world over have been warning the public about the dangers of consuming products rich in salt, sugar and saturated fat. Researchers have found clear evidence that consuming these products leads to obesity and may cause diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. As a result, many countries adopted different policies in recent years to reduce their consumption by the public. In 2016, for example, Chile was the first country to pass a law requiring a front-of-package (FoP) warning label on pre-packaged foods containing high levels of these ingredients (Reyes et al., 2019). This trend did not go unnoticed in Israel as well. In 2016, Israel's Minister of Health, Yaakov Litzman, stood at the podium at the Israel Heart Society Conference and declared: "McDonald's out! Not in our country!" He went on to announce that from now on these ingredients are the new "public enemies". In the weeks that followed a public committee was established to examine this issue. Several months later, the committee submitted its recommendations, and further discussions led the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) to enact a law which adopted the Chilean FoP regulation model. In doing so, Israel became the second country in the world (after Chile) to implement a national mandatory front-of-package food labeling system.

The Israeli case study of food industry regulation to reduce the growing excessive intake of foods high in salt, sugar and saturated fat, invites an interesting examination of the policy entrepreneur's decisive role in the policy process. A systematic review covering 40 years of policy entrepreneurship literature found that policy entrepreneurs can be defined as "innovative individuals or groups from the private, public or third sectors who are willing to invest – time, energy, expertise or money – to either advocate for major policy or resist it" (Frisch Aviram et al., 2019: 3). These highly motivated actors are usually not satisfied with current policy

regarding a specific policy issue, and seek to promote institutional change (Mintrom et al., 2014). Using innovative ideas and non-conventional strategies (Cohen, 2016), these entrepreneurs try to exploit a limited "opportunity window" (Kingdon, 1984) to influence policy outcomes that serve their interests.

Based on the policy entrepreneurship literature, and more specifically on John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model (1984), this paper's main objective is to analyze the process which led to the legislation of mandatory FoP labeling in Israel of pre-packaged foods containing high levels of salt, sugar and saturated fat. This article employs the Multiple Streams Model, focusing on the strategies adopted and implemented by the policy entrepreneur, to explain the different MSF streams and how the "opportunity window" which led to enactment of the law was opened.

This study uses a qualitative method to empirically examine the Israeli case study. The data were collected using two tools: a series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews and data from existing sources - written or online, on which we conducted a thematic analysis. Ten interviewees were selected based on their familiarity with the issue, whether by virtue of their official position or following their strong public involvement on the topic. Some of the interviewees provided names of other individuals who could elaborate upon or add to the information that came up in the interview (snowball sampling). Most interviewees asked to remain anonymous, and therefore all references to them when presenting interview information are made using identification numbers. Several interviewees did agree to be cited under their own name. Additional data were obtained from other sources, among them protocols of the Knesset Health Committee which prepared the FoP labeling bill for legislation, a research paper published by the Ministry of Health (MoH), articles and reports from daily newspapers, and websites. These sources enabled mapping of the relevant actors

for analyzing the case study, and were also used to supplement and complete data that did not come up in the interviews, and to cross-reference data that emerged in the interviews with other existing data sources. The combined findings from these two separate sources of information provided a broad and comprehensive reflection of reality, and enabled drawing more encompassing conclusions.

### **Policy Entrepreneurs: Characteristics, Motivations and Strategies**

The term "entrepreneur" was originally used in the economic sphere and is associated with Joseph Schumpeter (1934), a neo-classical economist who posited that entrepreneurial activity involves an innovative process that disrupts the equilibrium state and introduces new conditions. Thus, the entrepreneur is the catalyst for dismantling established orders and provoking disequilibrium (Vaz-Curado and Mueller, 2019). Later studies in management and business administration suggested that entrepreneurs are individuals who actively seek out opportunities in order to respond to them, capitalize on them, and create change. The entrepreneur's continuous pursuit of and response to opportunities takes place on the backdrop of limited resources such as money, human resources, and machines, in the hope of future returns (Hart et al., 1995). This definition suggests that while the average person may perceive situations as problems, entrepreneurs view them as opportunities to generate value (Drucker, 1985).

In recent decades, a growing number of researchers imported the term "entrepreneur" from the management and business sphere to the politics and policy sphere. While economists are primarily concerned with profit-making out of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1934), political scientists focus on individuals whose innovative actions influence politics and policies in the aim of garnering electoral support and reshaping the institutional boundaries of authority (Sheingate, 2003). The

first researcher in this regard was Robert Dahl, who, in his pioneer study about the changing structure of the local governance of New Haven, defined the entrepreneur as a political leader who "is not so much the agent of others as others are his agents." (Dahl, 1961: 6). However, the most influential scholar in the study of policy entrepreneurs in recent decades has been John Kingdon. In his seminal book, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (1984), he highlighted the role of the entrepreneur as a significant actor that pushes toward policy change while identifying and exploiting a "window of opportunities". Following Kingdon's work, other researchers addressed three major questions regarding political entrepreneurs: Who are they? What motivates them? and What are their main strategies?

Who can be considered a policy entrepreneur? A simple answer may be anyone who seeks to change the flow of politics and "attempts to transform policy ideas into policy innovations, and, hence, disrupt status quo policy arrangements" (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021: 945). A different perspective suggests that they consist of a variety of innovative individuals or groups that exploit opportunities to affect policy outcomes in a way that maximizes their goals (Cohen, 2021). Policy entrepreneurs can be found both inside and outside of government, and can come from the private, public or third sector (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Meydani, 2015). That is, actors from within the formal political system such as a politician or a bureaucrat (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) working to promote changes in the political arena, alongside actors such as interest groups (Salisbury, 1969; Moe, 1980), non-government organizations from the third sector (NGO's) (Cohen, 2016), private businesspeople (Cohen & Naor, 2013), or even concerned citizens working to promote the change of the political status quo (Callaghan & Sylvester, 2019).

What motivates policy entrepreneurs? One could wonder why policy entrepreneurs would decide to sacrifice their own resources to solve collective action problems. One answer may be self-interest. If the policy entrepreneur is, for example, a politician or a bureaucrat, they may seek to maximize their narrow interest which they can then translate into political power or social status (Downs, 1976). If the policy entrepreneur is an interest group, its main motivation may be an economic incentive, as long as the net benefit remains positive (Schneider et al., 1995) and can be translated into personal political profit (Salisbury, 1969). Another answer combines self-interest with the will to create social impact that may purely stem from ideology (Cohen, 2021).

What are the political entrepreneur's main strategies? In a recent comprehensive review of policy entrepreneurship literature, Frisch-Aviram et al. (2019) identified 20 strategies that entrepreneurs can use to achieve their final goal, a policy change. According to their findings, policy entrepreneurs are active in all stages of the policy process. This includes not only the early stages of agenda-setting and policy formulation, but also the final stages, namely policy implementation and evaluation. Nonetheless, they are usually dominant in the two early stages, in which they try to attract the policymaker's attention in identifying the public problem, and then to link this problem to a specific solution (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Cobb & Elder, 1972). To do so these entrepreneurs must use several strategies, among them: framing the problem in a desirable manner (while softening it up for the wider public) (Frisch-Aviram et al., 2019); developing solutions on the basis of knowledge and expertise (Zahariadis, 2015); building a coalition based on consensus and trust (Mintrom & Norman, 2009), and looking for opportunities and attention from policymakers, the media and the public (Capano & Galanti, 2021).

The role of the policy entrepreneur can be integrated into established theories about the policy process, e.g., incrementalism, institutionalism, MSF, punctuated equilibrium, and the advocacy coalition framework (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). As a theoretical and analytical framework, the MSF has been applied in “65 different countries, at five levels of governance, across 22 different policy areas, and conducted by researchers spanning the globe” (Jones et al., 2016: 30). Moreover, the MSF was the most common policy framework applied by researchers to study obesity prevention policy (Lyn et al., 2013; Cullerton et al., 2015). The Multiple Streams Framework is a comprehensive theory that considers the role of ideas, institutions, exogenous factors, and decision-maker rationality (Clarke et al., 2016), which may explain its widespread use.

### **The Multiple Streams Model and Policy Entrepreneurs**

The Multiple Streams Model assigns a decisive role to policy entrepreneurs in explaining the agenda-setting process, that is, how policy and decision agendas are set and alternatives are specified (Kingdon, 1984)<sup>1</sup>. The model, which is based on the American political system, identifies two groups of factors that explain the placing of an issue on the decision agenda, (a list of subjects moving into position for an authoritative decision, such as legislative enactment), namely, the actors and the processes. The first group, the actors, includes the President, the Congress, and bureaucrats in the executive branch, alongside actors outside of government (the media, interest groups, political parties, academics, researchers, and the public). The

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<sup>1</sup> Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model was adopted and reconfigured by various authors as an analytical framework (MSF) rather than a model. For example, Zohlnhofer and Rub (2016) examined its explanatory potential in various political systems, and Herweg et al. (2023) discussed the applicability of MSF to other stages of the policy process. This article employs the original model alongside some refinements made by the various scholars.



second group includes three processes, which Kingdon calls "streams": problem recognition, generating policy alternatives, and politics.

In the problem stream, conditions that deviate from the ideal state envisioned by policymakers or citizens, and that "are... [s]een as public in the sense that government action is needed to resolve them" (Beland and Howlett, 2016: 222), are brought to the policymakers' awareness. There are three ways to achieve this goal: indicators, focusing events, and feedback. However, as policymakers are made aware of many undesired conditions, not all of them become framed as problems (Kingdon, 2011; Herweg et al., 2023). Therefore, whether or not a problem receives attention also depends on its political relevance. That is, if a problem endangers the re-election of a politician, it will probably be defined as a relevant problem which the politician should confront (Herweg et al., 2023). However, this process is more complicated, as additional actors, those who benefit from the current situation, strive to use 'negative blocking' by convincing others that no such condition, which invites government engagement, actually exists (Kingdon, 2011).

In the second stream, experts in a given policy field aim to generate policy alternatives through a "softening up" procedure whereby proposals are raised and undergo selection in the policy community. This selection is conducted according to several criteria, as suggested by Kingdon and further broadened by Zohlnhofer and Hus (2016). Lovell (2016) maintains that the Multiple Streams Framework should incorporate additional theoretical insights about policy mobility, owing to the fact that ideas cross national borders. This increased mobility makes policy communities more "porous", thus leaving no time to soften up ideas in the local context given their legitimization through success in other countries. Consequently, external non-state

actors can be viewed as ordinary members of an international network influencing a local policy community.

The third stream – politics, takes place at the political system level. Thus, while the policy stream is located at the policy sub-system level, where debating is the dominant mode of interaction, in the political stream the prominent form of interaction is bargaining and exercising power, in the aim of consolidating a majority for a certain policy alternative. This third stream, which reflects the political climate, is comprised of three elements: the national mood, campaigns carried out by interest groups, and government (political parties, elected officials, bureaucrats that engage in turf battles, and administrators). Governments and legislators, and especially the change in their composition, affect the chances that a policy idea will be put on the agenda.

The three different streams are, for the most part, independent, each flowing at its own pace. For example, policy alternatives are generated within the policy community, not necessarily as a response to problems which have been recognized as public problems or as a result of the political climate. Similarly, political events do not necessarily take place in relation to recognized policy problems or to policy alternatives. While the flow of two of the three streams may couple together, this may not suffice. For example, policy alternatives may merge with problems, but there may not be a receptive political climate; or politics may couple with policy alternatives, but the problem may not be recognized as a 'public problem'. Moreover, getting an issue on the government agenda (lists of subjects to which governmental officials are paying serious attention) may require activity in only one of two streams: the problem recognition stream or the political stream. However, increasing the chances of an issue rising on the decision agenda requires the coupling of all three streams together,

rather than a partial coupling. All three streams couple when the matching solution (alternative) and problem meet a favourable political climate. It is this coupling that enables a policy change, and this is most likely when policy windows (opportunities for pushing policy proposals or conceptions of problems) are open.

Kingdon points out that the agenda-setting process is characterized by randomness, alongside planning by one or several policy entrepreneurs, whom he describes as “surfers waiting for the big wave”. Similar to the marketplace arena, entrepreneurs in the policy arena are “advocates who are willing to invest their resources (time, energy, reputation and money) to promote a position” (Kingdon, 1995: 179). Mintrom and Norman (2009) contend that entrepreneurs are more than just enthusiastic supporters of specific solutions. They are also the manipulators of problematic preferences and unclear technology (two MSF assumptions), due to the "conceptual interpretive element" (Kingdon, 2011: 110) of a problem. That is, how actors think about an issue depends on its overall label (health, economy, education, civil liberties) and the information taken into account. This 'emotional manipulation' within political contexts was put forward by Maor and Gross (2015), who associate the process of emotional entrepreneurship with emotion regulation. Thus, the entrepreneur's most prominent and ongoing activity is to soften up the policy community and the public, by raising favorable ideas as experimental balloons in order to better them. Concurrently, they take action towards coupling the three streams, awaiting the opening of the policy window through which they can advance their policy alternative.

### **Case Study: Saturated Fat, Salt and Sugar as the New Public Health Enemies**

People have changed their eating habits over the past decade, from basic, homemade cooking and healthy nutrition to ultra-processed food with low nutritional

value (dietary fibres, vitamins, and minerals) and very high calorie density (Popkin et al., 2013; Monterio et al., 2013; Elizabeth et al. 2020). Especially prominent is the increased consumption of fast foods, sweet and salty snacks, and sugar-sweetened beverages, which have a high percentage of saturated fat, salt (sodium), and sugar.

Obesity has become a global epidemic that is directly associated with consuming unhealthy foods (OECD, 2022). According to the latest WHO data, 2.5 billion adults aged 18 years and older were overweight in 2022, including over 890 million adults who were living with obesity. This corresponds to 43% of adults aged 18 years and over (43% of men and 44% of women) who were overweight; an increase from 1990, when 25% of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight. According to the WHO report, children and adolescents are the most vulnerable part of society. In 2022, over 390 million children and adolescents aged 5–19 years were overweight. The prevalence of overweight (including obesity) among children and adolescents aged 5-19 has risen dramatically, from just 8% in 1990 to 20% in 2022 (WHO, 2024).

Given this data, and following WHO recommendations, many countries throughout the world declared a war on obesity. In general, past efforts to combat the obesity epidemic worldwide focused on several tools, among them: education, taxation and legislation (regulation). The OECD report (2022) recommended that countries adopt several policy tools, since no single policy can win this war. The main tools include nutritional education focusing on children and adolescents, and taxing foods that have the potential to cause health damage (for a full and comprehensive review see: OECD, 2022; WHO, 2016; Mytton et al., 2012; Niebylski et al., 2015; Franck et al., 2013). Alongside these measures, the use of legislation and regulation is also very common. Numerous countries restrict unhealthy food advertising on some

sorts of media, or prohibit placing food and beverage vending machines in schools. These legislations can be found in Chile, UK, Ireland, Brazil, Peru, South Korea, Spain, France, and Poland (OECD, 2022). However, perhaps the most important regulation is that regarding pre-packaged food, which constitutes a significant portion of the food consumed daily by the population, and that is usually high in sugar and saturated fat.

Front-of-package labels (FoPLs) are one approach among a suite of strategies recommended to improve diets at the population level by providing consumers with accessible, trustworthy, and user-friendly information about the healthiness of packaged foods. Numerous types of FoPLs initiatives have been introduced to consumers around the world. In the UK it was the Multiple Traffic Lights; The Netherlands, France, Belgium, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland implemented the Nutri-Score; Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland introduced the Nordic Keyhole; and Australia and New Zealand used the Health Star Rating. Chile, Mexico and Uruguay decided to use a different type of FoP- warning labels (Pettigrew et al., 2023). A growing body of evidence indicates that the use of these FoPLs can not only lead consumers to make informed decisions towards healthier choices, but can also encourage industry to reformulate food products (Gillon-Keren, 2020; Roberto et al., 2021; Pettigrew et al., 2023; Hieke & Taylor, 2012). As we will demonstrate, the same intention was behind Israel's Ministry of Health FoPLs initiative.

### **Front-of-Package Labeling Policy: The Israeli Case**

Israel is a world-leading country in the consumption of unhealthy foods, which alongside physical inactivity cause obesity. For example, the population in Israel is characterized by a high intake of salt (sodium), 9.5 grams per day among adults and 12 grams per day among adolescents. This is a very high amount compared to the

recommended level, which is only 5-6 grams of salt per day for adults (Ministry of Health, 2017). The most recent surveys reported that 17.9 % of children aged 6-7 years, 30.2 % of adolescents aged 12 years, and 58.5% of adults are overweight or obese (Furman-Assaf et al., 2023). Overall, from 2010 to 2023, the percentage of overweight and obese persons in Israel remained similar and stood at 49% (55% of the men and 43% of the women) (CBS, 2023). Several other surveys put a spotlight on adolescents, indicating that 41% of the girls and 45% of the boys admit that they consume sugar-sweetened beverages on a daily basis. These figures are relatively high, even compared to the U.S. where 30% of the girls and 37% of the boys admitted consuming these beverages (Ministry of Health, 2017).

On April 14, 2016, on the stage of the annual conference of The Israel Heart Society, Israel's Minister of Health, Yaakov Litzman, announced: "McDonald's out! Not in our country!". This call was followed by strong applause of the audience. He went on to say: "We need to educate our children not to eat junk food. I know that they will criticize me behind my back. We must not consume so much candy. This holds true for diabetes and holds true for the heart. We are going to focus on prevention (of illness) this year". He emphasized that: "There are people and large companies that do not like (these statements). Let me tell you all a secret. I don't have primaries (in his political party). I chose the Health Ministry because I think it is the place where you can save people" (Elizera, 2016).

Four days later, the Ministry of Health established the "Regulatory Committee for the Promotion of Healthy Nutrition in Israel", chaired by the Ministry's Director General, Moshe Bar Siman Tov. The Committee's main recommendations included: restricting the marketing and advertising of harmful foods, promoting nutrition education, and encouraging medium and small producers to produce healthy foods

(Ministry of Health, 2016). However, the most important recommendation was to develop a new food labeling system. Several months later, this recommendation led the Knesset to legislate a law that adopted a mandatory FoPLs regulation model.

The FoPLs regulation system mandated that manufacturers mark their products - food and beverages, with red (unhealthy) warning labels, indicating that the products are 'high' in sugars, saturated fats or sodium if these are above the level specified in the law legislated by the Knesset. In addition, other products could be marked with a voluntary green (healthy) label, indicating that their composition is in line with the MoH nutrition recommendations for a healthy population (Gillon-Keren et al. 2020). The FoPLs reform was implemented in two stages, the first in January 2020 and the second in January 2021 (Shahrabani, 2021).

### **Promoting the FoPLs Policy Change in Israel**

As explained above, the presence of at least one policy entrepreneur significantly increases the chances that all three streams will couple together in putting an issue on the decision agenda. In the case of the FoPLs law, the identity of this actor was crystal clear, as all the interviewees pointed to the MoH Director General, Moshe Bar Siman Tov. Some maintained that the reform "was his baby", and others noted that "this was the most important thing for him after taking the position" (interviewees 2,4,5,6). Even though two of the interviewees claimed that Minister of Health Litzman had been keen on the issue of healthy food before Bar Siman Tov was familiar with the subject, one interviewee said that: "the credit goes to Bar Siman Tov; Litzman started with the hamburgers, but Bar Siman Tov was the one who forged forward" (interviewee 1). As we show below, Bar Siman Tov played a critical and major role in realizing the adoption of the FoPLs reform, and did so against all odds.

### ***Problem Recognition***

#### *Indicators and feedback*

According to the MSF, framing an undesired condition as a problem isn't self-evident. In the case of the FoPLs in Israel, deteriorating indicators coupled with feedback regarding a program that had not achieved its goals managed to bring about the change. Specifically, the results of several indicator-related initiatives carried out over the years preceding MoH Minister Litzman's speech in 2016 had been published and brought to the attention of politicians, warning of the significant risks to the Israeli population regarding the obesity and diabetes rates.

Beginning in 1999, the Israel Center for Disease Control and the MoH Food and Nutrition Services undertook the task of establishing a national database that would address various aspects of nutrition patterns in Israel, facilitate the study of these patterns, and implement interventions aimed at improving the health of the population. The first National Health and Nutrition Survey (MABAT), conducted from 1999 to 2001 and published in 2003, was the first in a series of health surveys aimed at highlighting these issues across different age groups within the Israeli population. Another indicator initiative was the Israel National Health Interview Survey, first conducted in 2003-2004, which was part of a multi-national project (European Health Interview Survey) conducted by the WHO. The survey data, which were presented in various MoH reports and publications, showed severe and deteriorating indicators (Ministry of Health, 2006).

Alongside surveys focusing on Israel, comparative publications also indicated Israel's deteriorating situation regarding obesity and damaging food consumption. For example, according to the WHO annual World Health Statistics report, which, inter alia, provides data regarding the obesity problem, Israel was among the ten leading



countries in the world with increasing obesity rates in 2008. Moreover, the number of people suffering from overweight and obesity tripled over the past 30 years. The OECD began publishing its annual "Health at a Glance" series in 2001. Drawing from comparable national statistics and other sources, this series offers insights into health status, health risks, healthcare access and quality, and health system resources. The data produced by these entities was brought to the attention of politicians in Israel over the years as they were published. Also, at the initiative of MK Moshe Matalon, Chairperson of the Israel Paralympic Committee, the data were also accessible to the public on the Knesset website through a report produced by the Knesset Research and Information Center in 2008.

Feedback and data about a program that did not achieve its goals provides another opportunity for converting an undesired condition into a public problem. In 2008, following the data released in the above documents, Israel's State Comptroller published a report about obesity prevention on the backdrop of a project initiated by the MoH in 2005. The report, titled "Task Force for Preventing and Treating Overweight and Obesity", recommended several measures to combat the current situation. It also found that the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the IDF had not implemented any of these measures (Report NO. 59B, 2008).

The "*Efsharibari*" (Israel National Program for Active and Healthy Living) was launched in 2011 as a joint initiative of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Culture and Sport, and Ministry of Education. The main goal of this national program was to foster an environment that facilitates healthier eating habits and incorporates physical activity into everyday life, across all population groups. The program included several components, among them: regulation (e.g., the Food Control Law for Food Served and Sold in Educational Institutions), encouraging employees to come to

work on foot or by bicycle, and reducing the cost of healthy food products (Efsharibari website). Although the program was implemented for more than a decade, the results indicated that it did not generate the desired change (Interviewees 1, 3), partially due to the meager budget, which was also cut in its entirety in 2014 (Kelner, 2014). As Kingdon indicates, once a problem has been recognized as a public problem (i.e., policy agenda), the media can choose either to amplify it and its recognition by intensely covering any related issue, or to ignore it, thereby reducing its chances of staying on the policy agenda. In our case, despite the various reports regarding the alarming indicators, and even though the failure of Efsharibari program was not kept a secret, it did not attract media attention.

#### *Entrepreneur problem framing*

Preceding his appointment as MoH Director General, Bar Siman Tov lived for a period of time with his family in the U.S., where he was shocked by the obesity rates of American children and by their junk food consumption. Therefore, after his appointment in 2015, he was determined to establish the Regulatory Committee for the Promotion of Healthy Nutrition in Israel in order to prevent such a critical situation in Israel (Linder, 2024). His personal agenda was woven into many of the statements he made in the Committee discussions when referring to the impact of unhealthy food on children's health. We found several examples of Bar Siman Tov's use of the "problem framing" strategy.

At one of the first Knesset Health Committee meetings (where the FoPLs bill was prepared for legislation), Bar Siman Tov said emphatically: "We are starting to deal with one of the things that most significantly dictate the health of all of us and the quality of life of all of us. If we look at children in first grade, one in five children is overweight or obese. Six years later, when they reach the seventh grade, it is

already one in three children, which is something much more serious." At the same Knesset Committee meeting he continued his argument, noting that: "We see children with diseases that we used to see defeat our grandparents. Who would have thought that a five-year-old child would have type 2 diabetes, that a fatty liver would appear in five-year-old children? This is our reality. We are facing a health, social, and economic crisis. We will not function as a society if we continue like this" (Protocol No. 631). Additionally, on another occasion, he declared: "The fact that Israeli children top the list of sugar consumption, alongside the worsening of obesity, should ring the warning bells in every government office in Israel, and lead to the government's commitment to take action to reduce this phenomenon" (Linder & Dovrat, 2017).

These quotes, and many others in this spirit, indicate the framing of the issue as child-focused. Considering the high birth rate in Israel (3.2 children per woman), coupled with indicators that significantly focus on children, it is no wonder that such framing helped put this issue on the policy agenda. Indeed, Bar Siman Tov was motivated to frame the issue as child-focused, following his personal experience (as a father) while living in the U.S., and as he was starting to don the 'entrepreneur hat' this personal dimension converged with the problem framing strategy.

### ***Policy Stream***

As mentioned, Kingdon notes that the policy entrepreneur's most prominent and ongoing activity is to soften up the policy community and the public by raising favourable ideas as experimental balloons for the purpose of bettering them. As such, the policy entrepreneur is the dominant actor in the policy stream, and also controls this process. Kingdon also differentiates between the policy entrepreneur's two tasks:

advocacy and brokerage, which, in our case were both filled by Bar Siman Tov at the policy stream level.

As an advocate, Bar Siman Tov gathered public health specialists, bureaucrats from other ministries, and representatives from the local food industry, to serve as members of the Regulatory Committee for the Promotion of Healthy Nutrition in Israel which he headed. This MoH Committee heard experts from various nutrition-related content areas, and conducted 13 meetings, all of which he attended and in which he was fully invested. Devoting his valuable time to this issue, he also participated in the relevant Knesset Health Committee meetings, where he continued to present alarming data about the results of consuming unhealthy food while pushing through his desired reform (Interviewees 4 and 8).

Bar Siman Tov's brokerage skills stemmed from his unprecedented background as an economist, rather than a medical doctor, who before his appointment as Director General of the Health Ministry served as Deputy Commissioner of Budgets in the Ministry of Finance. Despite the opposition to his out-of-the-ordinary appointment, the tools and skills he had acquired in his previous position proved to be critical in the role he took upon himself as a broker between the food industry and the advocates for maximal labeling. In doing so, Bar Siman Tov was identified by the others as the "Team Leader", the one actively leading the policy network. Throughout this process he used his negotiation and compromise skills in engaging with the other actors.

One of the interviewees maintained that: "It came from him, and the idea was to establish a committee that would bring all the stakeholders to the table, including the industry. This was innovative, although we had worked with them before, but not in this way" (Interviewee 9). At some of the Knesset Health Committee meetings, Bar

Siman Tov argued in favor of the food industry, noting that: "There is also value in not making industry in Israel feel that we see it as the enemy of the people. They are not the enemy of the people, I tell you this responsibly, throughout my conversations with them. It's perfectly fine, they understood their need to change and asked us to help them change, it is our duty to help them (Protocol No. 663). He also said: "Of all the things we can compromise on, we can give the industry more time on the assumption that it really uses it to reformulate the products. In my opinion, this is a worthy thing" (Protocol No. 631). His brokerage role was especially critical considering the opposition raised by the Ministry of Finance bureaucrats.

Bar Siman Tov also used his broad knowledge of economics to override other arguments raised on the issue. For example, when the representative of the Ministry of Economics claimed that the labeling would bring about a price increase, Bar Siman Tov replied: "Rubbish, absolute rubbish...I recommend a different set of excuses than this one"(Protocol of June 5, 2017). As described by one of the interviewees, "This was one of the most important things that Bar Siman Tov brought, perhaps the most important. When he took the position (of MoH Director General) he was enthusiastic about the regulatory tools as an economist and as a former Ministry of Finance person, and this helped us when we discussed it with the Ministry of Finance officials. Also, the fact that Bar Siman Tov once worked at the Ministry of Finance made it easy for him to talk to them" (Interviewee 8).

Despite his negotiating and compromise skills, Bar Siman Tov invited only one representative of the food industry to the 13 MoH Committee meetings. In other words, the General Manager of the Food Industries Association within the Manufacturers' Association of Israel represented the entire industry, including all the importers. The choice of this sole representative testifies to the desire to narrow the

impact of the food industry at the stage when the foundations of the reform were being laid. Moreover, according to several interviewees, Bar Siman Tov was not interested in a real 'ping pong' about the draft recommendations, and therefore most of the Committee members only heard about them at the press conference that took place after they were formulated and finalized. This strategy may imply that Bar Siman Tov's pattern of managing the Committee was somewhat centralized, directed at avoiding any deviation from his preferred alternative. As one of the interviewees complained: "Bar Siman Tov views partnership this way: I share my thoughts with you and allow you to be present along the way, but in the end I am the regulator and I decide" (interviewee 6).

Last but not least, Bar Siman Tov also used media coverage to his advantage. Thus, the journalists of the dominant economic newspapers, namely, "Calcalist", "Globes", and "TheMarker", were engaged in the policy stream, covering the MoH Committee meetings, as well as the Knesset Health Committee meetings which followed. All 3 newspapers targeted the food industry by delegitimizing its demands and operating patterns. In fact, they not only adopted a stricter approach than that of the MoH, they accused the Ministry of surrendering to the industry on several matters.

### ***Politics Stream***

#### *National mood*

As indicated in the MSF, to increase the chances that the policy entrepreneur's pet solution will be adopted, there needs to be a large group of individuals in the public that tends to think along common lines. Once government officials sense this change of mood, they work to advance certain agenda items accordingly. Regarding a healthy lifestyle, for example, this shared mood is expressed in the concept of 'health literacy', defined by the World Health Organization as "the development of the

cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways that promote and maintain good health” (Levin-Zamir, 2016). Sørensen et al. (2012) further broadened the definition to include a more comprehensive understanding. Thus, health literacy now encompasses the knowledge, motivation, and competencies to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information. This enhanced definition emphasizes the capacity to make informed judgments and decisions in everyday life regarding health care, disease prevention, and health promotion.

Based on WHO definitions, and 600 individual interviews, a study conducted in Israel in 2012 found satisfactory health literacy among 69% of the population (Levin-Zamir et al. 2016). Furthermore, a comparative study revealed that the percentage of people with good health literacy in Israel is higher than the European average, and even surpasses the health literacy results of the best-performing country, the Netherlands (Levin-Zamir, 2019). Another demonstration of Israelis' awareness of a healthy lifestyle was found in a social survey conducted by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (2010) dedicated to health and lifestyle. According to the survey report, 50% of the population exercises at least once a week, and 31% exercise three times a week. Furthermore, 40% contend that the main reason for exercising is its contribution to health and disease prevention. These findings indicate that, for the most part, the Israeli public was ready to receive information about unhealthy food, and to use it to make informed and intelligent decisions.

#### *Interest groups and the impact of their lobbyists*

The second element of the politics stream, characterized by bargaining and power relations, refers to interest groups. Our case study demonstrates their major impact on the FoP labeling reform, mainly at the policy design stage. When analyzing

the protocols of the parliamentary Health Committee, where the regulations were formulated, we identified two types of interest groups. The first, a relatively small group, included several NGO's that for the most part sought to be a loud opposition (to the second group), arguing in favor of the law and representing the concern about the public's health. This group included experts on nutrition and public health, among them The Israeli Forum for Sustainable Nutrition and The Israel Association of Public Health Physicians, alongside purely anti-capitalist civil society organizations such as Lobby 99 and The Association for Progressive Democracy.

Dr. Hagai Levine, chairperson of Israel's Association of Public Health Physicians, noted: "Our activity has been continuous over the years. It was based on creating a diverse civil coalition from the medical and nutrition professions, along with civil society, that work closely together. Of course, we did not agree on every aspect, but we shared the same goal, public health" (Levin, Interview). The activities included writing and publishing professional papers, meeting with Knesset members, and giving interviews to the media, in order to serve as the voice of the public (Levin, Interview).

Shabi Gatenio is the founder and CEO of The Association for Progressive Democracy, and his reputation in the Israeli media is that of a "lobbyist hunter". In our case, as in many previous cases, his mission was to shine a public spotlight on the role of the professional lobbyists. He continuously interrupted the Knesset Health Committee meetings on the issue whenever one of the lobbyists argued in favor of the food industry, not only accusing the industry that its products kill people, but also discrediting the arguments they made in the committee (Protocol No. 656).

The second type of interest group coalition included what could be considered the most powerful food industry actors in Israel. These included Israel's largest food



manufacturers, among them Tnuva, Osem and the Central Bottling Company (Coca Cola Israel), as well as the two biggest importers, Schestowitz and Diplomat, which import worldwide leading brands such as Barilla, Pringles, Oreo, and Milka. But above all, the local food industry's interests were represented by The Manufacturers' Association of Israel (MAI) and The Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce (FICC). Over a period of more than 18 months (April 2016 to December 2017), these industry leaders and organizations tried to thwart the MoH initiative to fight the obesity problem by means of the FoP labeling law, exerting direct pressure in meetings with decision makers: Knesset members, ministers and bureaucrats. For example, at a meeting in April 2017 between Minister of Health Litzman and Eyal Malis, CEO of Tnuva, the latter expressed great concern as, according to the law, the most popular cheese in Israel, "Emek" cheese (a local version of Gouda cheese), would be labeled with a red warning sticker (Levi, 2019).

Furthermore, the MAI and the FICC, as well as other business enterprises, decided to use the services of some of the leading lobbying firms in Israel, among them: "Policy", "Impact", "Gilad" and "Goren Amir". Their representatives were present at all the important Knesset Health Committee meetings, arguing in favor of their clients' interests. At the last critical meeting, which took place on December 20, 2017, we counted more than 29 people, from among a total of about 50 attendees (including Knesset members and officials from the relevant ministries) who were either lobbyists, MAI or FICC representatives, or regulation managers from the largest food industry manufacturers (Protocol No. 662).

At all the Knesset Health Committee meetings on this issue, and especially at this meeting, these representatives tried to minimize the law's impact on them or their clients. For example, they exchanged small "secret" notes between them during the

meetings, and argued with Bar Siman Tov and the other MoH officials about every single paragraph and line which could be very costly for the industry. Moreover, to this specific Committee meeting the MAI and the FICC invited a ‘reinforcement player’, Mr. Gianluigi Benedetti, Italy’s ambassador to Israel. Delivering a long speech, he warned the decision makers that Italian companies would be forced to stop exporting to Israel if the regulations requiring manufacturers and importers to mark products high in sugar, saturated fat or sodium with red warning labels would be approved (Dovrat & Linder, 2017). Due to the major role the interest groups and lobbyists played in this case, it was no surprise that the Committee Chairperson, MK Eli Alaluf, closed the meeting saying that: "After what happened today, the lobbyists should take a closer look at their impact and their behavior" (Protocol No. 662).

### *Government*

The third element of the politics stream refers to the composition of political parties, elected officials, and bureaucrats. In this case, they all acted to enhance rather than inhibit the process. First, 36 out of the 120 Knesset members of the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset were National-Religious or Ultra-Orthodox MKs, two sectors with the highest birth rates in Israel, and naturally more attentive to any child-related issue. Moreover, the government’s Minister of Health at the time was Yaakov Litzman, the representative of an Ultra-Orthodox party who, during his term in the MoH (as Deputy Minister and as Minister), was very active on children's welfare issues (for example, free dental services up to 18 years of age). This backdrop corresponded with the framing of the issue as child-focused, and constituted a significant factor in recognizing the issue as a problem. Furthermore, Litzman was known for his political skills and had personally led the adoption of several reforms on various issues. This signaled that, unlike many politicians, he was not afraid of change, thus facilitating Bar Siman Tov’s initiative.

MK Eli Alaluf, then chairperson of the Knesset Health Committee, was another politician who advanced the placing of the issue on the decision agenda. He noted that he did not like the food industry lobbyists and was not afraid of them, and therefore did not let them take over the discussions and demanded that they identify themselves as lobbyists for the sake of transparency. This was verified in the Committee meeting protocols (Protocol No. 662 and No. 631). Alaluf also remarked that the representatives of the Finance and Economics Ministries were rather weak, which enabled Bar Siman Tov to navigate the discussion as he saw fit (Alaluf, Interview). The appointment of the economist Bar Siman Tov as Director General of the MoH, who had just returned from the U.S. with personal experience on the issue at hand, coupled with the above-described enabling composition, best reflects the notion of planning alongside coincidence.

## **Conclusions**

According to the annual Social Survey of Nutrition and Eating Habits, conducted in 2023 by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, a red label on a food product package hindered 44% of the population from buying the product. The survey also found decreased consumption of sugary drinks since 2017 (CBS, 2023). These data indicate successful and effective management of the policy process, against all odds, carried out by the policy entrepreneur, Director General of the Health Ministry, Moshe Bar Siman Tov.

Indeed, the problem recognition stream on the one hand, and the politics stream on the other hand, constituted fertile ground for passing the FoPLs reform. However, as we described, the power of the food industry and its endless resources, compared to the scarcity of resources on the part of the NGO's that supported the reform, posed a real obstacle on the way to its adoption and enactment into law.

Furthermore, the fact that the pioneering country (Chile) that took the route of food labeling was not among the leading democratic Western countries called the entire idea into question, and provided justifications for those who opposed the reform. However, Bar Siman Tov, employing several strategies and equipped with brokerage skills and economic knowledge, managed to overcome the inhibiting factors, leading Israel in a new direction for the benefit of the health of its population.

The case of front-of-package food labeling in Israel once again highlights the important role of policy entrepreneurs in the process of coupling all 3 streams together, and can serve as a model for policy entrepreneurs in other countries seeking to create profound change in healthy food consumption.

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