

JANUARY 2016

SUGAR

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

MOTION:

**“THE UK SHOULD
INTRODUCE A LEVY
ON SUGARY DRINKS”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Levy](#)

[Sin tax](#)

INTRODUCTION

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Amid new advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO), which recommends that we halve our daily sugar intake to 5% of total calories consumed per day [Ref: [BBC News](#)], celebrity chef Jamie Oliver made headlines last summer when he publically called for a levy on sugary drinks in the UK. He argued such a tax would be “deeply symbolic”, and would go some way towards helping to alleviate childhood obesity in the UK [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Although the government has so far resisted calls for a sugar tax, debate about how to deal with the cost of lifestyle illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes in children and adults, has polarised opinion. For some, the idea of a sugar tax makes perfect sense and, whilst difficult to implement, would “mark official recognition of growing global concern about the impact of sugar on the widening obesity epidemic” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Similarly, columnist Janet Street-Porter argues that: “When it comes to taxing sugar, I wish politicians would stop worrying about the nanny state and – just for once – be bold and brave. A tax on drinks would be a start.” [Ref: [Independent](#)] Others though are wary of the UK government attempting to intervene in our choices, with writer Alex Deane bemoaning the “paternalism” of the proposal to tax sugary products, describing it as being “hugely patronising” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. But this discussion is about more than just sugar – critics and supporters are contesting the limits of government action on influencing behaviour, and are at odds about where responsibility for lifestyle choices should rest – does government have a responsibility to intervene to change behaviour, or should it be left to individuals to make their own decisions? Should the UK implement a levy to protect children and young people from too much sugar? Or is a sugar tax a blunt instrument, ill-equipped to deal with the complexity of the obesity crisis in the UK?



THE SUGAR DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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Why sugar, why now?

Public Health England released a controversial study in the autumn in which it outlined the dangers of consuming too much sugar and, among other measures, recommended the government introduce a tax or levy of 10-20% on sugary products to deal with obesity related illness [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Sugar tax supporter Conservative MP Sarah Wollaston, Chair of the Parliamentary Health Committee, underlines that “there is no time to lose”, and that the government has a responsibility to be “bold and brave” on childhood obesity, because a quarter of the most disadvantaged children in the country are obese by the time they leave primary school [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Moreover, Jamie Oliver claims that introducing a levy of 20p per litre on soft drinks containing added sugar (equating to 7p on a 330ml can), “could have a significant impact on health in the UK, reducing sugary drink consumption by possibly 15%”, as well as raising up to £1bn per year in revenue [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. But the evidence itself is disputed, and statistics cited by critics argue that it is not a higher sugar intake that has caused the increase in obesity rates, because “per capita sugar consumption has fallen by 16% since 1992” [Ref: [Institute of Economic Affairs](#)].

What are the arguments for a sugar tax?

For scientist Robert Lustig, the case for a sugar tax is self-evident. He observes that: “Almost half of our daily consumption is in sugared beverages. The iron law of public health states that reducing the availability of a substance reduces its consumption, which reduces harms” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Jamie Oliver, along with many advocates of a sugar tax, stresses the effect that sugar

has on the health of children - citing evidence that as many as 26,000 primary school children have to visit the hospital every year to have their rotten teeth taken out [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. And that’s in addition, supporters argue, to the 7000 amputations due to type 2 diabetes, and the £9 billion per year that the NHS spends treating these obesity related illnesses more generally [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. If the UK were to adopt a form of taxation on sugary drinks, proponents claim, it would not be the first country to do so. In January 2014, Mexico, which has one of the most overweight populations in the world, introduced a soda tax of 10% on all sugar sweetened drinks in a bid to reduce obesity related illness. Initial research suggests that the effect of the tax has been to decrease sugary drink consumption by an average of 6% by the end of 2014 [Ref: [Time](#)]. Furthermore, recent polling claims that 80% of Mexicans now link excessive amounts of fizzy drink with diabetes – prompting writer Alice Thompson to conclude that the Mexican sugar tax, “has sent out a vital message.” [Ref: [The Times](#)] Ultimately, supporters of a sugar tax in the UK argue that alongside improved labelling and industry regulation, it would be a crucial tool to help reconfigure consumer behaviour for the better, in the same way that: “Government intervention on smoking, done with incremental bans and restrictions, has transformed public health” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Professor Julian Hamilton-Shield agrees, declaring that: “No one can really doubt the harm sugar containing drinks do to children: they rot their teeth and likely make them obese and at risk of later type 2 diabetes. If a tax is needed to reduce sugar consumption, I am right behind it. No one complains about tobacco taxation: sugar should be treated in the same way.” [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]



THE SUGAR DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED

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What are the arguments against a sugar tax?

Much of the criticism of a UK sugar tax centres on concerns about government intervention in the area of public health. For critics, personal choice is key, and as one Telegraph opinion piece argues: “The solution to the sugar crisis lies in personal responsibility. If someone is eating or drinking more sugar than they should, they ought to stop.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] Opponents of a sugar tax also suggest that singling out one food group, in this case sugar, fails to acknowledge the complexity of obesity, and as Fiona Hunter observes, “issues around nutrition are never black and white....there is no such thing as healthy and unhealthy foods, only healthy and unhealthy diets.” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] Other critics place an emphasis on alternatives to a tax, such as more exercise, with Professor Richard Tiffin suggesting that, “our expanding national waistline reflects rising levels of inactivity and sedentary occupations more than poor diet.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] More broadly critics focus on the ineffectiveness of so called ‘sin taxes’ on changing consumer behaviour. Campaigner Christopher Snowden uses the example of the failed Danish ‘Fat tax’ which was levied on all food products which contained more than 2.3% saturated fat, and was rescinded after little over a year [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. He observes that the policy failed because people found ways of obtaining fatty foods regardless of the tax, by purchasing them abroad for less money, shopping at cheaper food stores, or by simply paying more for the products – resulting in the tax having little or no observable effect on obesity rates, and ultimately becoming a symbol of “well-meaning government folly.” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] Another point of contention in the debate is the disproportionate effect sin taxes have on less well-off members of society, with critic Ruby Lott-Lavigna stating

that “the sugar tax will just be a tax on the poor.” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] Other products such as chocolates, sports drinks and soft drinks are already subject to a 20% VAT rate, unlike most other foodstuffs [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and as such a levy on sugary drinks would be a double tax, again hurting the poor the hardest.



ESSENTIAL READING

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NOTES

FOR

[The science is in: the case for a sugar tax is overwhelming](#)

Robert Lustig *Guardian* 27 October 2015

[Medical professionals back a sugar tax, so what are you afraid of Mr Hunt?](#)

Janet Street-Porter *Independent* 23 October 2015

[Food giants may insult me, but it's their hold over our leaders that's truly alarming](#)

Jamie Oliver *Daily Mail* 22 October 2015

[Sugar tax would tackle the modern leprosy](#)

Alice Thompson *The Times* 4 September 2015

AGAINST

[A sugar tax? Let's stop nannying poor people and find a proper solution](#)

Linda Tirado *Guardian* 1 December 2015

[Jamie Oliver is a patronising bully and he can stick his sugar tax](#)

Alex Deane *Telegraph* 22 October 2015

[The sugar tax won't change bad habits](#)

Telegraph 13 July 2015

[A tax on sugar won't work, as the shipwreck of the Danish 'fat tax' shows](#)

Christopher Snowden *Spectator* 22 May 2015

IN DEPTH

[How one of the most obese countries on earth took on the soda giants](#)

Tina Rosenberg *Guardian* 3 November 2015

[The fat lie](#)

Christopher Snowden *Institute of Economic Affairs* August 2014

ORGANISATIONS

[Public Health England](#)

[World Health Organisation](#)



SUGAR:

"The UK should introduce a levy on sugary drinks"



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DEBATING MATTERS
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BACKGROUNDEERS

[A sugar tax is vital if we're to keep the NHS alive](#)

Sir Liam Donaldson *The Times* 5 January 2016

[Sugar tax: is it enough to solve the obesity crisis?](#)

Chris Askew *Independent* 30 November 2015

[If we fail to tax sugary drinks, we fail our poorest children](#)

Sarah Wollaston *Guardian* 30 November 2015

[Sugar tax, bacon alerts...just more attacks on the poor](#)

Rod Liddle *The Sun* 28 October 2015

[Mexico is having second thoughts about the soda tax, and so should everyone else](#)

Joseph Thorndike *Forbes* 26 October 2015

[More tax on sugar is not the answer](#)

Telegraph 23 October 2015

[Collaboration, not taxation, is needed to tackle obesity](#)

Ian Wright *Guardian* 23 October 2015

[I love you Jamie Oliver, but your sugar tax idea is classist](#)

Ruby Lott-Lavigna *New Statesman* 23 October 2015

[Don't sugar the pill](#)

The Times 22 October 2015

[Sweet talk: in defence of sugar](#)

Fiona Hunter *Spectator* 22 October 2015

[Sugar tax: could a price hike help solve Britain's obesity crisis?](#)

The Week 21 October 2015

[Jamie Oliver's tax on sugar won't work and will leave the poor even worse off](#)

Carole Malone *Daily Mirror* 21 October 2015

[Jamie Oliver is right: its madness not to clamp down on sugar](#)

Gaby Hinsliff *Guardian* 3 September 2015

[The Guardian view on sugar: cut it out](#)

Guardian 15 July 2015

[Mexico's sugar tax is working. The US should learn from it](#)

Lizzie Wade *Wired* 13 July 2015

[Can public policy stop obesity?](#)

Christopher Snowden *Cato Unbound* 12 January 2015

[Britain needs action on obesity, but the evidence for a sugar tax is thin](#)

Richard Tiffin *Telegraph* 26 June 2014

AUDIO/VISUAL

[Public health vs individual freedom](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 12 February 2014

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IN THE NEWS

[Unilever Boss warns against sugar tax](#)

Guardian 25 January 2016

[Sugar tax not ruled out by David Cameron](#)

BBC News 7 January 2016

[Sugar tax in Mexico cuts sales of sugary drinks by 12%](#)

Telegraph 6 January 2016

[Tory MP brands Jamie Oliver's sugar tax campaign 'Patronising nonsense'](#)

Independent 30 November 2015

[Tax on sugary drinks backed by MP's](#)

BBC News 30 November 2015

[Doctors want a 20% sugar tax, according to new poll](#)

City AM 4 November 2015

[90% of hospital chiefs support launch of sugar tax, ITV News finds](#)

ITV News 3 November 2015

[Britons back sugar tax to fight obesity](#)

Daily Mail 30 October 2015

[Finland: tax on sweets and ice cream to be scrapped](#)

BBC News 29 October 2015

['Would introducing a sugar tax change behaviour? Absolutely'](#)

The Times 24 October 2015

[PM rules out sugar tax despite expert warnings](#)

Sky News 23 October 2015

[Sugar tax and offers ban 'would work'](#)

BBC News 22 October 2015

[Report calls for 20% sugar tax on fizzy drinks](#)

The Times 22 October 2015

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[If intake was cut, it would save 77,000 lives and prevent 6 million rotten teeth](#)

Daily Mail 22 October 2015

[Sugar tax could help solve Britain's obesity crisis, expert tells MPs](#)

Guardian 21 October 2015

[Be bold on sugar tax Jamie Oliver says](#)

BBC News 19 October 2015

[Mexicans begin to slim with the help of the soda tax](#)

Time Magazine 12 October 2015

[Jamie Oliver: Food industry hits back at chefs calls for sugar tax on soft drinks](#)

Independent 27 August 2015

[WHO: daily sugar intake 'should be halved'](#)

BBC News 5 March 2014

[Denmark to abolish tax on high fat foods](#)

BBC News 10 November 2012



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS
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www.debatingmatters.com

FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.

**“WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**

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