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FOWL PLAYERS Members of the Food and Allied Workers' Union marched to the EU embassy in Pretoria on Wednesday to petition against severe job losses in the poultry industry, which they blamed primarily on cheap dumped imports
PHOTO: TEBOGO LETSIE

SUGAR TAX
A BITTER DEBATE

As soaring obesity rates are pitted against warnings of job losses, Parliament remains undecided, writes **Steve Kretzmann**

Members of Parliament (MPs) this week gave short shrift to the sugar industry's resistance to the proposed 20% sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) tax.

This comes amid an avalanche of public health statistics, presented by civil society and academic institutions supporting the tax at public hearings held in Parliament on Tuesday.

Members of the Standing Committee on Finance and of the Portfolio Committee on Health were bombarded with alarming figures on the obesity rate in South Africa, as well as research linking the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) - such as diabetes and heart disease - with sugar intake.

The non-nutritional value of calories contained in SSBs - which is the reason for the sugar tax having been mooted by Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan in his budget speech last year - was singled out by institutions such as the schools of public health at the universities of Cape Town (UCT) and of the Witwatersrand, as well as by the Society for Endocrinology, Metabolism and Diabetes of SA.

Professor Tolu Oni, from the UCT School of Public Health, cited a Global Burden of Disease Study which showed that:

- Poor diet generated more disease than physical inactivity, smoking and alcohol consumption combined;
- Sugar calories promoted fat storage and hunger; and
- Moderate exercise alone did not decrease the incidence of diabetes, a disease closely linked to obesity.

She added that systematic reviews revealed that alternatives to sugar tax, such as public health education, had had little effect on sugar consumption.

This was borne out by many of those present at the packed parliamentary hearing choosing to drink Sprite or Coke during the lunch break.

Karen Hofman, director of the Wits-based programme Priceless SA - designed to enable smart decisions about health investments in South Africa - said there had been a 16% increase in obesity among South Africans over the past five years.

One-fifth (20%) of this increase could be attributed to consuming SSBs, she added.

According to Professor Melvyn Freeman, the health department's chief director of NCDs, 40% of South African women and 10% of men were now obese.

"We have an explosion of NCDs in South Africa," said Freeman.

This, he added, meant a third of all deaths among those aged below 60 were as a result of NCDs.

The proposed tax amounts to a charge of R2.29 per gram of sugar (amounting to an extra R2.42 per litre of Coke).

IFP MP Mkhuleko Hlengwa went further in the parliamentary debate, proposing that sales of SSBs to under-18s be banned.

Industry players opposing the tax included the Beverage Association of SA (BevSA), the SA Fruit Growers Association and the SA Sugar Association. They questioned the academic institutions about their apparent lack of in-depth research using regulatory instruments to determine maximum sugar content and proposed that a total dietary intake study be undertaken

While conceding that South Africa had an obesity problem, all three bodies expressed concern that the industry would face huge job losses.

The sugar association calculated that a drop in sugar sales would result in a loss of 3 990 permanent jobs and 6 300 seasonal jobs, with small-scale growers being the hardest hit.

Mapule Ncanywa, BevSA's executive director, said 75 000 jobs in the sector were at risk, but in its presentation, Treasury put overall job losses at "about 5 000 at most".

But job losses seemed to make little impression on committee members, who asked why the industry could not diversify or approach Parliament to discuss solutions, such as alternative uses for sugar - for instance, sugar production for biofuels - and increasing import tariffs on sugar.

Dr Patrick Maesela, an MP on the health committee, expressed his dismay that the argument for job protection came "at the expense of the health of our people".

Even if the tax was not introduced, he added, "What guarantees do we have that those jobs will still be there?"

The sugar industry was also taken to task for not having actively educated communities about nutrition.

The Food and Allied Workers' Union, usually the leading defender of jobs, was sanguine, calling for meaningful dialogue and constructive debate to mitigate job losses.

Finance committee chair Yunus Carrim suggested committee members tally figures presented on all sides to determine the cost of SSB consumption to healthcare against potential losses in jobs and revenue.

"It strikes me that people who have no vested material interest [in the sugar industry] are all taking one position [in support of a sugar tax]," he said.

He added that no expert disagreed about the link between SSB consumption, obesity and NCDs, expressing surprise that the sugar industry had not "mobilised scientists to provide contrary views".

He urged committee members to engage in further consultations and convene separate meetings with labour, industry and civil society.

He said further oral submissions to Parliament would be scheduled for next month.

TALK TO US

What do you think of the proposed sugar tax? Should government act to prevent people from overindulging in sugar and, in so doing, ease obesity rates? Are the industry's dire warnings about job losses justified?

SMS us on 35697 using the keyword SUGAR and tell us what you think. Include your name and province. SMSes cost R1.50

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