The World Health Organization supports the consideration of Government of South Africa of introduction of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) to help reduce excessive sugar intake. Â This is one of interventions proposed in the Strategy for the prevention and control of obesity in South Africa 2015-2020. WHO has supported introduction of such taxes since it was proposed by the National Treasury in August 2016.

WHO's Representative to South Africa, Dr Rufaro Chatora, took part in a parliamentary hearing held on 31 January to discuss the proposed SSB tax. During his presentation, Dr Chatora highlighted the evidence and the impact of SSB tax. Experience from other countries which implemented the same tax demonstrates its potential to reduce consumption of sugar and raise revenues that can be used to prevent and control diabetes, obesity and other noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

In recent days, the WHO Executive Board was held, during which Board members asked the WHO Secretariat for more information on a range of policy options and cost-effective interventions proposed by WHO to prevent and control NCDs, including the use of taxation on SSBs, before the next World Health Assembly (22-31 May).Â

There has been no "veto" of such interventions proposed by WHO or its Executive Board, including SSBs, despite industry statements and media reporting based on such statements. WHO Member States have asked for more information on these interventions ahead of the upcoming World Health Assembly.

"WHO stands ready to support the Republic of South Africa, and as well as other countries, in protecting and improving the health their citizens and offering effective, technically sound and feasible measures to promote health for all people, no matter age, gender or background," says Dr Chatora.

Taxation on SSB is just one of a range of cost-effective measures proposed by WHO to curb the threat of NCDs, responsible for the deaths of 16 million people every year before the age of 70. Other interventions targeting obesity include nutrition labelling; marketing restrictions of unhealthy foods and beverages to kids; fruit and vegetable subsidies; physical activity policies and social marketing campaigns. WHO member states around the world, including South Africa, have committed to halt the rise of obesity and diabetes, reduce premature deaths from NCDs by 25% by 2025 and one-third by 2030, the latter target in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.