Lessons from Vietnam's Campaign for a Tax on Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

Vital Strategies

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COVER

Image from the campaign to increase public support for a tax on sugary drinks in Vietnam.

Introduction

In the bustling cities and quiet rural towns of Vietnam, sugary drinks are a staple—promoted on billboards and ubiquitous in shops throughout the country. These products, which provide little to no nutritional value, have contributed to Vietnam's growing noncommunicable disease (NCD) epidemic,[1] demonstrated by rising rates of obesity, heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

In 2024, facing burgeoning rates of NCDs, the government of Vietnam introduced a bold proposal: a national tax on sugar-sweetened beverages to curb consumption and improve public health. To build support, Vital Strategies and partners launched an ambitious nationwide communication campaign to spotlight the dangers of sugary drinks, mobilize broad public backing and urge policymakers to act despite fierce industry opposition.

Sugar-sweetened beverages are liquids that contain added caloric sweeteners, such as sucrose, high-fructose corn syrup or fruit-juice concentrates. Examples include regular soda or soft drinks (not sugar free), fruit drinks, sports drinks, energy drinks, sweetened waters and coffee and tea with added sugars.[2]

At the time, public knowledge of the health risks of sugary drinks was low, and beverage companies were using their influence to resist the proposed legislation. Without a coordinated communication effort, the momentum for change could have been lost.

This case study recounts how targeted storytelling, community mobilization and strategic media engagement helped shift public attitudes, sustain political will and ultimately contribute to the historic passage of Vietnam's sugar-sweetened beverage tax in July 2025.

Setting the Scene

From 2002 to 2017, sweetened beverage consumption in Vietnam rose from 6.6 liters to 46.5 liters per person annually—a sevenfold increase.[3] In the same period, rates of obesity, particularly among children, rose sharply, along with cases of Type 2 diabetes and other diet-related NCDs. By 2024, NCDs accounted for more than 80% of deaths nationwide.[4]

In November 2024, the government introduced a bill proposing revisions to the Law on Special Consumption Tax to the National Assembly. These revisions included a 10% excise tax for sugary beverages with more than 5 grams of sugar per 100 milliliters, alongside raising taxes on alcohol and tobacco products.[5] The vote was initially scheduled for May 2025, which created a critical window to build public awareness and strengthen policymaker resolve.

Campaign Development

The situational analysis revealed both the urgency and vulnerability of Vietnam's effort to introduce a tax on sugary drinks. While global evidence demonstrates the triple-win potential of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes—improving population health, generating revenue and reducing health care costs[6]—awareness in Vietnam was still low. At the same time, industry lobbying threatened to delay or dilute the policy, making it critical to mobilize visible public demand that could counter corporate influence.

Many countries have implemented health taxes on unhealthy foods, sugary drinks, alcohol and tobacco to reduce obesity and NCDs. Evidence shows that such taxes effectively lower consumption and associated health risks, including obesity, NCDs, and related mortality.[7-10]

To meet this challenge, Vital Strategies brought its expertise in strategic communication to design and coordinate a national campaign that would bridge the gap between policy evidence and public engagement. As technical lead, Vital Strategies managed the campaign's design, creative development and overall coordination, while working hand-in-hand with a coalition of civil society and governmental partners:

- **WHO Vietnam** ensured the campaign aligned with the country's health priorities and lent the authority of an international health body to reinforce policy credibility.

- **Health Bridge Vietnam** connected the communication effort directly to policymaking, working closely with government ministries on the tax proposal and integrating advocacy with public messaging.

- **Vietnam Women's and Youth Unions**, with their extensive grassroots networks, helped extend campaign messages to communities nationwide and acted as a supporting voice for the tax at the National Assembly.

- **Vietnam's Ministry of Health** oversaw campaign compliance, facilitated approvals of campaign materials and acted as a bridge to decision-makers, reinforcing government ownership of the initiative.

Together, this coalition created a unified front: credible evidence and technical expertise from global and local health actors, grassroots mobilization from civil society, and official sanction from government. Vital Strategies' role was to knit these contributions into a powerful public mandate for the sugary drinks tax so the policy had both the technical justification and the popular support needed to advance.

The campaign activities executed by partners in Vietnam were built on four core objectives:

- **Highlight the serious, long-term health harms caused by sugary drinks.**
- **Educate both the public and policymakers.**
- **Counter well-funded industry interference with credible, fact-based messaging.**
- **Use a variety of media modes, alongside grassroots outreach, to access different segments of the population.**
- **Call for immediate policy action by the government.**

Campaign Activities

The campaign set the agenda by making the health dangers of sugary drinks a widely discussed topic. To create momentum around the sugary drinks tax, partners coupled national messaging and worked closely with local communities. As the National Assembly vote neared, the campaign shifted to emphasizing the tax as a necessary government measure to protect health, particularly among children and adolescents.

The campaign combined mass media, digital outreach, and grassroots mobilization:

- **Mass Media**: Prime-time television spots, national radio segments, billboards and cinema ads reached wide swaths of the population.
- **Digital & Social Media**: Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and out-of-home screens in thousands of residential, office and commercial buildings carried campaign videos and graphics, tailored to younger audiences.

- **Community Outreach**: Women's and Youth Unions engaged their extensive networks, hosting community events and sharing information at the household level.
- **High-Profile Launch**: A national launch event in Hanoi brought together journalists, policymakers and local leaders, reinforcing the unity of the message across the country.

Before launch, Vital Strategies conducted message testing to assess the clarity, cultural resonance and impact of the campaign materials. Post-launch monitoring tracked earned media coverage, social engagement and signs of shifting public sentiment in the lead-up to the vote.

Le Thanh Hai, Communication Officer, Policy Advocacy and Communication, Vital Strategies at the campaign launch event with journalists.

In April 2025, Vital Strategies' Vietnam team joined the Ministry of Health's Department of Legal Affairs, WHO Vietnam and Health Bridge to officially launch the mass media campaign that ran to mid-June. The launch was integrated with a media workshop, where about 40 journalists from major newspapers and television stations learned about the health impacts of sugary drink consumption and the related tax measures.

Journalists attend the media workshop, supported by Health Bridge, as part of the campaign launch.

The Center for Women's Development in the North Central Region implemented strategic communication activities ahead of the vote. On May 16, a contest between five teams of students, "Sugary drinks—Correct Understanding Guides Appropriate Behavior," was held in at Ngo Quyen High School, Bo Trach District, Quang Binh Province to highlight the policy and promote changes in consumer behavior. Over 1,300 people participated, including students, parents, and education and health departments officials, and the contest was covered on eight mass media outlets and streamed on the schools' and Center's webpages. In addition, two communication forums[11] about the harms of sugary drinks, reducing sugary drink consumption and promoting long-term behavior change were held in the Gio Linh and Hai Lang districts, each attracting about 200 participants.

The Vietnam Central Youth Union organized a series of high-impact communication and engagement activities about the health risks of sugary drinks. On May 16, a hybrid talk show, [“Learning About the Harmful Effects of Sugary Drinks on Adolescents,”] drew 200 in-person attendees and 4,639 online views and was also covered by 14 press agencies. On May 31 in Hue City, six university teams and 600 spectators joined a student contest to produce creative content demonstrating the harms of sugary drinks, which was covered by 10 press agencies. And an online survey ran in early June to gauge support for the excise tax on sugary drinks ahead of the National Assembly's vote generated 22,417 respondents with 70% in favor of the tax.

Attendees at the hybrid talk show, “Learning About the Harmful Effects of Sugary Drinks on Adolescents,” organized by the Vietnam Central Youth Union.

Results and Lessons Learned

On June 14, 2025, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed amendments to the Law on Special Consumption Tax, introducing a tax on sugary drinks and raising taxes on other consumption-regulated goods, including alcohol and tobacco.[12] The amended law includes an ad valorem tax of 8% on sugary drinks starting in 2027, increasing to 10% in 2028.

University teams participate in a student contest in Hue City focused on the harmful effects of sugary drinks on young people.

The inclusion of sugar-sweetened beverages in the tax was an important step forward; however, the current rate of 8% falls short of the WHO's recommended minimum of a 20% excise tax[13] to achieve meaningful reductions in consumption, creating an opportunity for future increases to improve public health outcomes.

While formal impact evaluation research is ongoing, early indicators suggest the campaign succeeded in making sugary drink harms a mainstream public issue and in building strong, visible support for the legislation.

Lessons learned:

- **Framing the tax as a measure to protect children's health resonated strongly with the public.**
- **Partnering with respected grassroots organizations amplified reach and credibility.**
- **Synchronizing high-profile national messaging with localized community engagement proved critical in sustaining momentum.**

Conclusion

The Vietnam sugar-sweetened beverage tax campaign demonstrated the power of strategic communication to drive policy change. By pairing compelling media with grassroots voices, the campaign not only supported the passage of landmark legislation but also helped spark a national conversation about the role of sugary drinks in people's health, and how policies to reduce consumption can prevent diseases and save lives.

Vietnam's experience offers a model for other countries facing similar public health challenges: invest in a clear, evidence-based narrative, amplify it through trusted messengers and sustain it through the decisive moments of policymaking.

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