



Towards a Harmonized Nutrient Profile Model (NPM) in the East African Community (EAC)

A Strategic Opportunity for Public Health and Regional Integration



01 Executive Summary

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are rising rapidly across the East African Community (EAC), now contributing to a substantial and growing share of mortality. Diet-related risk factors are among the leading drivers of this trend.

Several EAC Partner States have already made progress in developing national-level nutrient profile models (NPMs). However, differences in nutrients of concern, thresholds, and food categorization risk creating regulatory fragmentation within an increasingly integrated regional market.

EAC Partner States should align national NPMs within a common regional framework supported by a coordinated technical process and a clear implementation roadmap.

This brief is intended for EAC policymakers, Partner States national ministries of health and trade.



Key message:

Aligning nutrient profile models across the EAC will strengthen public health impact, improve the regulatory coherence, and support regional trade integration.

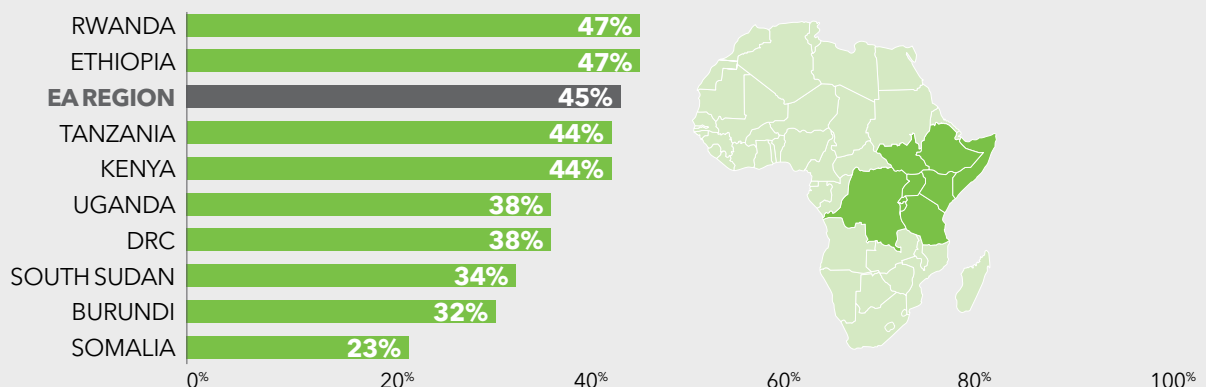
02 The Growing Burden of Diet-Related NCDs in the EAC

NCDs, including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers, and chronic respiratory conditions are now a major contributor to mortality and disease burden across the EAC^{1,2}.

- Recent estimates indicate that: ~ 45% of all deaths in East Africa (EA) are attributable to NCDs.
- Highest burden observed in Rwanda and Ethiopia at 47% followed closely by Tanzania and Kenya at 44%.

Dietary risks driven by changing food environments are central to this burden. These trends also have important equity dimensions. Women and urban populations often experience higher exposure to unhealthy food environments, while lower-income groups may face constrained access to healthier options^{3,4,5}. Addressing diet-related NCDs therefore requires policy approaches that are both effective and equitable.

Figure 1: Proportion of deaths attributable to NCDs (%)



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Why Nutrient Profile Models Matter

NPMs are a critical policy tool used to classify foods based on their nutritional composition ⁴. They determine whether a product is considered “unhealthy” and therefore subject to regulation. They underpin multiple policy interventions, including,

- Front-of-pack nutrition labelling (FOPL) and fiscal policies (e.g., taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages or unhealthy foods),
- Restrictions on marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children,
- Public procurement standards, food standards, and trade regulations.



Key message:
NPMs are the technical backbone of food environment policies.

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Current Status of NPM Development in the EAC

EAC Partner States are at different stages of NPM development:



Country	National NPM Status
Kenya	NPM developed and published ²
Uganda	NPM developed
Tanzania	Advanced stage
Rwanda	Not yet developed
Burundi	Not yet developed
South Sudan	Not yet developed
Democratic Republic of Congo	Not yet developed
Somalia	Not yet developed



Key observation: Progress exists, but approaches are not aligned. Differences include nutrients of concern included, threshold levels used to classify products, and food categorization approaches used.

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The Core Challenges with Regulatory Fragmentation

- Products are classified differently across countries
- Industry faces higher compliance costs
- Policies are applied inconsistently
- Consumers receive mixed signals



Implication:
Fragmentation undermines both public health impact and regional integration goals.

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Why Harmonization Matters

1 Strengthening Public Health Impact

A harmonized approach ensures consistent identification of unhealthy foods across countries, enhancing the effectiveness of policies aimed at improving diets and reducing NCD risk.

2 Supporting Trade and Market Integration

Alignment reduces technical barriers to trade and creates a more predictable regulatory environment for industry. This is particularly important in the context of the EAC common market, where food products move across borders.

3 Enhancing Regulatory Efficiency

Harmonization allows countries to pool technical expertise, reduce duplication of effort, and build on shared evidence. It also supports coordinated policy implementation across multiple domains.

4 Promoting Equity

A consistent regional approach can help ensure that all populations benefit from similar levels of consumer protection while allowing for context-specific adaptations where necessary.

Example:

A packaged snack produced in one EAC country may be classified as “unhealthy” and require front-of-pack labelling, but when exported to another country with different thresholds, it may not be classified in the same way. This creates inconsistency for consumers, increases costs for manufacturers, and weakens policy impact. A harmonized NPM would ensure consistent classification across countries.

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Policy Applications: Immediate Opportunities

Key opportunity: A harmonized NPM can be readily applied across multiple policy areas:

- **FOPL:** Enabling clear and consistent consumer information
- **Fiscal policies:** Supporting the design of effective and aligned tax measures
- **Public procurement and school food standards:** Promoting healthier food environments in public institutions
- **Marketing restrictions:** Defining which products should not be marketed to children
- **Food standards and trade regulation:** Supporting alignment of product standards across the region

These represent practical entry points for implementation and demonstrate the cross-cutting value of a common NPM framework.

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Regional Relevance and Lessons

Regional collaboration on nutrient profile is not unprecedented. The WHO African Region Nutrient Profiling Model provides a regional foundation that several countries have drawn upon or adapted ⁶. Beyond Africa, regional experiences such as the Pan American Health Organization Nutrient Profile Model⁸ demonstrate that countries can adopt or adapt a common framework while maintaining national flexibility. Over time, this has supported greater policy coherence and strengthened implementation across multiple policy domains.

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Legal and EAC Policy Foundation

The EAC Treaty supports public health cooperation, standards harmonization, and regional integration².

A harmonized NPM is therefore consistent with EAC objectives and represents a logical extension of ongoing efforts to strengthen regional policy coherence.



Key message: Harmonization aligns with existing EAC mandates.

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Recommendations

To advance alignment of NPMs across the EAC, Partner States should facilitate the realization of the following recommendations:

- 1 **Establish a regional technical working group for a regional NPM harmonization.**
Comprising representatives from health, standards, and relevant sectors
- 2 **Agree on a common regional NPM framework**
Including core nutrients of concern, thresholds, and food categorization principles
- 3 **Allow for limited national adaptation within a harmonized structure**
Ensuring flexibility while maintaining regional coherence
- 4 **Link the regional NPM to priority policy areas**
Including FOPL, fiscal measures, public procurement, and marketing regulations
- 5 **Develop a regional roadmap with clear timelines and responsibilities**
To guide implementation and monitor progress

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Conclusion

Diet-related NCDs are rising across all EAC Partner States, and countries are increasingly taking steps to address this through policy action. At the same time, regional food systems are becoming more integrated.

A harmonized NPM framework will not only support more effective policy implementation but also position the EAC as a leader in coordinated action to address diet-related NCDs.



Key message: With increasing regional trade integration and growing national policy activity on NCDs, there is a narrow window to align approaches before fragmentation becomes entrenched.

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Author: Shukri Mohamed

Contributors: Lyagamula Kisia, James Kawai, Chao Shete, Fabian Oriri



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