

Puerto Rico Considers “Fat” Tax on Obese Children: A Fight for Children’s Health or a Tax Collection Scheme?

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It seems that the Puerto Rico government is scrambling to find ways to collect tax revenues to satisfy its debt obligations. Why? Well there is a new controversial “Fat” tax bill filed by Puerto Rican Senator Gilberto Rodríguez to combat child obesity. The plan calls for school teachers to identify and locate obese children and refer them to the Puerto Rico health department officials. Then they will determine what is the cause of the child’s obesity problem and formulate a diet and exercise plan. Then they will monitor the child’s progress every four weeks. The tax penalty would start at \$500 if the child’s weight does not improve within the first six months and up to \$800 after another six months if there are still no improvements. This is absurd! United Press International’s (UPI) report ‘Puerto Rico may fine parents of obese children’ described the proposal:

The bill, introduced by Sen. Gilberto Rodríguez, would make the Department of Education in Puerto Rico responsible for identifying children who are at risk for obesity, but not due to preexisting medical conditions, according to El País. Health officials would indicate obesity health risks to parents. If the child’s condition does not “progress” within six months, parents could be fined \$500. If after another six months the child’s condition does not improve, the fine could be \$800. The case could be brought to social workers at the Puerto Rico Department of Family Affairs.

The idea is not new. Jonathan Gruber, the architect of Obamacare declared in 2010 that taxing “fat people” by body weight was an option to fight obesity in an article titled ‘*Taxing Sin to Modify Behavior and Raise Revenue*’ for the *National Institute for Health Care Management* (NIHCM) and said:

Ultimately, what may be needed to address the obesity problem are direct taxes on body weight. While it is hard to conceive of this approach being a common public policy tool in the near term, such taxation may be happening indirectly through health insurance surcharges. Currently, employers may charge up to 20 percent higher health insurance premiums for employees who fail to meet certain health-related standards, such as attaining a healthy BMI. The new health reform legislation increases this differential to 30 percent, with the possibility of rising to 50 percent. Results of programs that use differential premiums to impose direct financial penalties for obesity will bear watching in the future.

Many on the Island-nation do not agree with the new bill including the president of Puerto

Rico's chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Ricardo Fontanet who declared *"It will bring complications because there are obese children due to medical complications and genetic factors"* the report said. I agree to a certain extent, however, Puerto Rico's obesity problem especially for children has one major problem that Mr. Fontanet did not mention and that is a direct correlation with obesity and U.S. fast food corporations. Many Fast food corporations has invaded Puerto Rico including McDonalds, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wendy's, and several others have led to the domination of the local food markets. In a 2005 report by Caribbean Business stated how fast food corporations began in Puerto Rico:

The fast-food industry has come a long way since such chains as Tastee Freeze and Big Boy began appearing on the island in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since then, the number of chains has multiplied aggressively, demonstrating Puerto Rico is an attractive market. As a whole, 2,000 fast-food restaurants in Puerto Rico are estimated to rake in \$1 billion to \$1.3 billion a year in revenue, according to industry sources. Studies also have shown 77% of locals visit fast-food restaurants often.

If there are 2,000 fast food restaurants with 77% of locals as consumers, then do expect obesity levels to increase. One film that fast food enthusiasts' should watch is Morgan Spurlock's *'Super Size Me'*, a 2004 documentary film that tracked Spurlock's 30-day experimentation by eating three meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) a day from McDonalds. What was the result according to Spurlock's film?:

After six months of deliberation, Judge Robert Sweet dismissed the lawsuit against McDonald's. The big reason? The two girls failed to show that eating McDonald's food was what caused their injuries. Interesting, in only thirty days of eating nothing but McDonald's I gained twenty-four and a half pounds, my liver turned to fat and my cholesterol shot up sixty-five points. My body fat percentage went from eleven to eighteen percent, still below the national average of twenty-two percent for men and thirty percent for women. I nearly doubled my risk of coronary heart disease, making myself twice as likely to have heart failure. I felt depressed and exhausted most of the time, my mood swung on a dime and my sex life was nonexistent. I craved this food more and more when I ate it, and got massive headaches when I didn't. In my final blood test many of my body functions showed signs of improvement, but the doctors were less than optimistic.

I am not saying that fast food is the main cause of obesity. There are other factors including poverty, U.S. food imports laced with genetically modified organisms (GMO) and the lack of education on the benefits of eating healthy non-GMO foods. Puerto Rico can re-examine a policy that would benefit the Puerto Rican people. For starters, the Puerto Rico government can *"Ban"* fast food restaurants that are a health hazard to the local population. Bolivian President Evo Morales was a vocal critic against McDonalds and other fast food corporations. In 2013, McDonalds shut its doors after 14 years of operation. Here is what President Morales said at a speech to the UN general assembly on February 20th, 2013 prior to McDonald's decision to close all of it's remaining stores:

The major multinational food companies seek to control the production of food and to dominate global markets by imposing their customs and foods. The only goal of such producers is to generate profits. So they standardize food and

drinks, turning them into global foods produced on a massive scale with the same formula. They are not interested in the health of human beings, only in their earnings and corporate profits.

U.S. corporate fast food chains have saturated the world with endless fast food restaurants no matter what country you visit except Montenegro, Bermuda and now Bolivia. This is an interesting turn of events concerning the backlash of fast food corporations besides the worldwide resistance against Monsanto and other GMO-based corporations. There is a growing awareness among the public on the health hazards of fast food and its exploitation of workers. There is also the question of cultural imperialism when American fast food is imposed on local communities around the world. The mainstream media (MSM) said that McDonald's closing in Bolivia was due to its decline in sales. The truth is that the Bolivian people and the government of Evo Morales rejected globalization and corporate fast food in their country. McDonalds has opened up dozens and sometimes even hundreds of restaurants once their operations are approved. Fast food corporations have a negative impact on communities especially when it comes to local customs' and culture. The climax of cultural imperialism imposed by American fast food corporations into almost every country on the planet for profits does undermine local economies and its dynamic culture besides the health risks customers face. In Bolivia's case, health risks are associated with the way McDonalds prepares their food according to Lance Devon of www.naturalnews.com:

The rejection isn't necessarily based on the taste or the type of food McDonald's prepared. The rejection of the fast food system stemmed from Bolivian's mindset of how meals are to be properly prepared. Bolivians more so respect their bodies, valuing the quality of what goes into their stomach. The time it takes for fast food to be prepared throws up a warning flag in their minds. Where other cultures see no risk, eating McDonald's every week; Bolivians feel that it just isn't worth the health risk. Bolivians seek well prepared, local meals, and want to know that their food was prepared the right way. This self respect helps Bolivians avoid processed "restructured meat technology," often used by fast food joints like McDonald's.

In 1999, the Island of Bermuda had constant protests by the local population against the construction of a McDonalds. The protests were so intense that the government passed a law banning all franchised restaurants in the country. According to local reports, an 83 year old senior and resident of Bermuda by the name of Phyllis Harron, said *"It is not Bermudian. McDonald's cheapens wherever it goes."* The government of Montenegro also banned McDonalds in opposition to globalization in an article published by www.viennareview.net titled *'Montenegro: Not Lovin' It'* stated:

By making this decision to ban McDonald's, Montenegro has, in a way said no to globalisation. It was also an expression of concern for the health of its inhabitants, an act of solidarity with local restaurants, and maybe even a gesture of support for the trade balance. The decision also made a political statement regarding the involvement of the United States. And in the process, Montenegro may have made itself a test case of how to deal with similar problems of globalisation that may, in long term, harm the populations, trade, or health of other Eastern European countries.

Imposing a "Fat" tax on people because of their obesity will not solve the problem. The Puerto Rican government needs to stand up to U.S. corporations and Washington

by “*Banning*” GMO laced imports and closing all of the fast food chains that serve unhealthy food to the Puerto Rican people. They need to support local farmers and businesses that produce and sell organic food. Imposing a tax on Puerto Rican families is not a solution. However, for the Puerto Rican government, it is seeking ways to collect tax revenues to satisfy its debt obligations to its creditors. More than 28% of Puerto Rican children are considered obese which means that they can generate millions in tax revenues. Puerto Rico’s governor Alejandro Garcia Padilla has made raising taxes a priority to reduce Puerto Rico’s deficit. Puerto Rico debt service burden requires between \$3.4bn and \$3.8bn a year for at least the next four years. The “*Fat*” tax is just another option for the Puerto Rico government to raise money they need to pay off their debt.

One problem with Senator Rodriguez’s proposal is how far will the government go for tax revenues? What will they tax next? Children who are under weight? What about children who have other health issues and diseases such as cancer or even epilepsy? How far will they go?

An ABC News article also reported the reaction to the proposal by a deputy director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut:

“This proposal is very unfair and inappropriately penalizes and stigmatizes parents,” said Rebecca Puhl, deputy director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut. “Childhood obesity is a highly complex issue, and while the home environment is important to address, much broader societal changes are required to effectively address obesity.”

Policies that support parents are much more helpful than policies that penalize them, she said. Improving access to opportunities for physical activity and providing incentives toward buying healthier food, for example, have already proven effective in cities like Philadelphia, Puhl said.

One proposal I have for Senator Rodriguez is to start eating three meals a day at McDonalds for one month and see if he will gain weight and develop health problems as the result. Then maybe he can submit a new bill to end all fast food corporations from operating in Puerto Rico. Then we can reverse the obesity rate by supporting local non-GMO healthy foods which can help local businesses, farmers and improve our children’s health. Taxing parents will not solve the obesity problem; eliminating or even reducing the number of fast food restaurants is a step forward towards a healthy society. That is one option Puerto Rico should consider if they are serious about helping obese children. But as long as Puerto Rico remains a colonial territory under Washington, it will continue to be a captive market for U.S. business interests and their fast food restaurant chains.

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