# Stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of the Victorian Salt Reduction Partnership: a qualitative study

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Supplementary Table 1. Stakeholder quotes illustrating key themes for each process element, by action area

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| **Action area** | **Process element** | **Theme** | **Quotes** |
| Establishing a Strategic Partnership             | Perspectives on achieving aims   | Learning how to work together | *It’s a true partnership where every organisation brings strengths to the table... the real success of this project is that learning how to collaborate and work with others and recognise each of the strengths that they bring is really important. (NGO 9)* |
| Achieving collaborative action | *I think the partnership had achieved what it set out to achieve in terms of collaborative action, setting of action plan that is about us working together for salt reduction specific to the state. (SGSA 11)* |
| Achieving capacity building | *I think there has been good ongoing discussion, collaboration, I think there’s been a bunch of capacity building. (Research 4)* |
| Enablers to intervention delivery    | Commitment from Partners | *I think that’s been critical in having all of those people with a common interest around the table because it’s been such a long time, the working group period and you need a range of players committed to that to keep momentum going through. (Research 1)* |
| Regular strategic meetings | *The ability to have a meeting every three months, same people coming together, who heard the conversation last meeting, at that partnership level – it usually makes it much easier and it’s kind of an enabler. (SGSA 11)* |
| Diverse skills and expertise (capacity building) | *I think those core groups brought a really good mix of skills and expertise, which I think we all learnt from. In my early days on the partnership when we're establishing the agenda, it was really useful and great because we all learned from one another and you know we had some pretty fiery kind of debates and discussions, which were great. (NGO 7)* |
| Developing a shared action plan | *Looking at the evidence, engaging with the key stakeholders around it, appraising options for action, feasibility, political acceptability a whole host of different domains to then draw-up a shared plan, on what the consensus for action on that would be that everyone could co-commit to. (SGSA 13)* |
| Barriers to intervention delivery   | Less active involvement from some partners | *I think we’ve had some who haven’t actively contributed in the same way as others... they share our messages and our campaign, but it wouldn’t always feel like they had a stake. (SGSA 11)* |
| Too many people / organisations | *You do have to get a lot of people involved and a lot of people across things or signed off by people. (NGO 5)* |
| Slow start-up | *It might have been a good year before it was quite clear what they were planning to do to me … trying to design implementation strategies… looking at getting other stakeholders involved and it is quite a slow process, but it took a while for me to clearly understand what the implementation strategies were going to be. (Research 3)* |
| Perspectives on the fidelity of the intervention | Changes to Partnership members  | *A number of other players have come on as it’s deemed relevant that they can contribute and obviously they have an interest in this area (Research 1)* |
| Perspectives on utility/ quality of the intervention  | Effective Partnership  | *It’s been really effective to have these different organisations with different skillsets working so closely together (NGO 21)* |
| Enabler to intervention delivery | *The partnership’s a background enabler (SGSA 12)* |
| Generating Public Debate        | Perspectives on achieving aims  | Salt in the public domain | *I think we’ve had salt talked about in the public domain, pretty consistently, and I think that’s a really competitive environment for nutrition, so I think that’s a pretty great achievement. (SGSA 11)* |
| Shaping public debate | *I think the research has been particularly powerful and productive. It’s been a major part of the partnership and I think the quality of the research coming out and the way in that’s being used to try and shape public debate has been highly effective (SGSA 13)* |
| Enablers to intervention delivery | Naming companies | *Those research reports, the way that they were designed to actually name companies and brands, meant we got great media pick-up, that meant we got great reach. (SGSA 11)* |
| Barriers to intervention delivery | Alignment of organisational and Partnership views | *The Heart Foundation is, as are most organisations are now, shifting away from the nutrients focus… to a more whole-food approach. So, we certainly yes felt some tensions there… when we’re looking at food categories (NGO 21)* |
| Barriers to achieving outcomes | Crowded nutrition space | *The newspapers are full of debates about ‘clean eating,’ and caffeine will give you this and your processed fats will give you that, we used to talk about fats and now we’re talking about sugars, in that context talking about salt it was always going to struggle to get cut through. (SGSA 13)* |
| Perspectives on the fidelity of the intervention | Changes in the design of the intervention | *If we now went into designing this, we’d go in with the intention of implementation looking like it ended up... It took a while to get to that... this idea if you benchmark industry around a nutrient or around the healthiness of their products, you can leverage them for public awareness and food industry engagement and potentially government policy engagement depending on what the political landscape is. That’s a key lesson. (SGSA 11)* |
| Perspectives on utility/ quality of the intervention  | Engaging media, industry and policy makers | *What’s been really effective has been the product category reports, which the George Institute has done. These regular reports, which basically look at salt levels of certain foods, we use those for strategic advocacy to get media attention... it raises awareness of the public and our policy makers, but it also enables us to liaise directly with the food companies to raise their awareness... and invite them to the table, and to develop strategies to try and reduce salt ... that’s worked relatively well. (Research 2)* |
| Scalability  | *This concept of doing these surveys on food groups and resurveying every few years and that naming and shaming of individual products, brilliant, absolutely critical and I reckon that was something that would be scaled up and a really valuable piece of work. I thought that approach was very important. (NGO 8)* |
| Raising Consumer Awareness               | Perspectives on achieving aims    | Positive achievements, given limitations | *With the campaign, they’ve done well, given the budget and all the other factors, that was always going to make that a tough task. (SGSA 10)* |
| Good reach and recall within the target audience | *Nearly 5% of the target markets were reached with this campaign across the three years that we did an intervention, which is huge, and then of that, 82% of that are recalling one of our top key messages about that there’s processed food is high salt, that they need to be reading labels and looking for lower salt options, and eating fresh is best. So there’s some really good positive outcomes and they were achievements against objectives (NGO 21)* |
| Limited impact on general population | *The metrics we got on awareness-raising were promising and were positive and that’s great but Deakin’s research would say we’re not changing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours on a general public level but potentially with that target market of campaign we have raised awareness (SGSA 11)* |
| Concerted campaign | *We were able to run a concerted campaign for four years around getting Victorians to reduce their salt intake - I think that was a huge achievement (NGO 9)* |
| Enablers to intervention delivery | Utilising earnt media to increase reach | *Whilst all our paid advertising focused on Victoria all of our organic social and our earnt media was all national so we reached far beyond that. (NGO 21)* |
| Barriers to intervention delivery  | Limited mediums | *Look I think it [the reach] is limited to some degree because it's only social media… there's no broader brush...we haven't got a diversity of mediums (NGO 7)* |
| Weak messaging | *Our call to action in our consumer awareness has perhaps not been as strong as it could've been (NGO 7)* |
| Barriers to achieving outcomes   | Inability to cut-through other nutrition messages | *I think the target audience that we were targeting was problematic in that they’re being bombarded by all sorts of messages around what to feed their kids and how to feed their kids and how to get them exercising or how to maintain their health. So I think there were some challenges in perhaps the target audience that we selected. (NGO 9)* |
| Target audience did not see the relevance | *I think we've had problems with the target audience for the consumer group and I don't know whether they were the best place to start...You can often find salt and that issue with the older age group because they see it as relevant to them and we've seen that through the consumer awareness that the people that were the biggest uptake are those that are older because they see the relevance. (NGO 7)* |
| Short intervention timeframe | *All credit to the partners and the Partnership in that we were able to do this for four years, but shifting consumer behaviour and changing an entire food supply is a real long term commitment and you’re not going to see significant shifts in the space of four years. (NGO 9)* |
| Perspectives on the fidelity of the intervention  | Awareness raising was planned and then group deicision to try and move the target audience along the Stages of Change | *At first we sort of wanted to make them aware and say "look there is a lot of salt in these packaged products so we want you to be aware of that". And then they were like "okay, maybe we are making them aware, we have done a few different campaign bursts, can we get them to consider this a bit more, consider doing something about this". So then that was introduced, more of like potentially a swap message, and then by the time I came to it last year when I started, through discussions with the general working group and the partnership group, it was sort of like, "look, why don’t we see if we can push people towards that behaviour change so can we actually get them to act, can we actually get them to do something about reducing their salt". (NGO 5)* |
| Reverted to awareness and consideration due to cost-efficiencies | *We decided to cut that action and acquisition part and just focus on awareness and consideration, because we knew with the budget we had, we could still retain and get good numbers and healthy traffic and cost efficiencies in educating people at that stage (NGO 5)* |
| Limited mediums after first campaign round | *The first round of the campaign, for "Unpack the Salt", we did outdoor advertising, which performed well. We didn’t have quite as much money the second time we ran it so it was then more just digital and online... When you change because of finances, you might lose a little bit of your impact. (SGSA 11)* |
| Perspectives on utility/ quality of the intervention  | Not effective in increasing public demand for salt reduction | *What we were hoping was that the campaign originally would generate some of the community awareness and action to help elevate it [salt] as a conversation, a bit like it has with family violence and is starting to happen with obesity. That hasn’t really happened and so the politicians have been able to kind of ignore it for want of another (SGSA 10)* |
| Not effective at reducing salt intake at the population level | *With the small number of people that that impacted then that was a good response but it was a small number of people so at a population level I would say it was ineffective (SGSA 10)* |
| Policy development and strengthening (policy and advocacy)        | Perspectives on achieving aims  | Did not achieve policy change | *“Whilst we might not have seen policy change, we’ve definitely continued the conversation and put support behind it” (NGO 21)* |
| Supported activities that were already planned | *I feel like the advocacy activities probably have just added a strong supporter base around things that were in-train. (SGSA 11)* |
| Enablers to intervention delivery | Developing a blueprint | *We developed the call to action document. I think was a great output and a deliverable... it's probably the first time organisations have got together to actually get some form of consensus, a blueprint on what we need going forward. (NGO 7)* |
| Barriers to intervention delivery  | Lack of allocation of roles and responsibilities | *We developed a clear sense of what our keys asks were, but then we never really designated who was going to do what. (Research 2)* |
| Uncertainty around ownership and leadership | *I think one of the challenges of the partnership, when you’ve got multiple organisations, a lot of strengths, but then you’ve got a certain degree of who’s owning it, leading, driving it, and who’s going to make those calls and who’s going to get the credit for it. Which is unfortunately the politics working anywhere and I think that’s probably held some of the progress back in that policy advocacy space because mixed in with all that political context (SGSA 10)* |
| Barriers to achieving outcomes | Political climate | *There’s been some good work but as a whole it probably hasn’t quite had the impact at the state and federal level as we would have wanted. That’s not necessarily because of the fault of any of the partners, it’s partly because of the political conversations and agendas out where salt is and you can’t make an issue popular with politicians if they don’t want it to be and there’s not a public push (SGSA 10)* |
| Perspectives on the fidelity of the intervention | Shift from targeting state government to federal government | *Up until probably June 218, we were advocating at a state level, and then we shifted, we thought it was more of a national, a federal issue... so we wrote a new plan (NGO 21)* |
| Perspectives on utility/ quality of the intervention  | Joint advocacy | *There are lots of benefits to a partnership working together on strategic advocacy and I think we’ve utilised that quite well on some occasions, but perhaps not as well as we could throughout the whole project (Research 2)* |
| Advocacy asks document | *Some people might say well that’s the statement of the obvious but to have it as a document there, to hand-out to governments and to use as and advocacy tool was a milestone (NGO 8)* |
| Innovative approaches with food industry              | Perspectives on achieving aims | Establishing relationships with manufacturers | *We’ve been successful in developing really strong relationships with some of Australia’s major food manufacturers (NGO 6)* |
|  | Understanding reformulation practices  | *We set out to engage with top manufacturers and understand what’s happening within these businesses and then to showcase their practice, where it was available and try and help those who aren’t, and I think we have definitely achieved all of those things (NGO 21)* |
|   | Developing supportive resources and services | *And we also were able to, as a result of working with them, develop a guide to support particularly the Victorian-based objectives that we originally had at the outset of the project. So that guide was something we could develop for these smaller to medium manufacturers based in Victoria and that’s been shared with them through various networks. So yes, I think we’ve definitely achieved those outcomes. (NGO 21)* |
|   | Changes to the food supply | *How effective will activity that has kind of sped up in the last year or two be in actually getting salt levels down in the time that were measuring?... If you looked at it right now I’m not sure if we could see that the food supply has already shifted. (Research 1)* |
| Enablers to intervention delivery | Building positive relationships | *Your overall aim was to really support manufacturers and you wanted to provide us with the reformulation guide, you had an event that was really, really supportive of companies who were doing things well and that really helped us to get involved (Industry 15)* |
| Barriers to intervention delivery  | Uncertainty of roles and authority | *This is happening at Federal level and therefore what is our role and what is our authority in terms of industry engagement. So I think it was that lack of clarity of roles, and where do we fit and what’s our authority, I think that was probably one of the barriers. (Research 2)* |
| Slow start to implementation | *Engaging with food industry at the start may have been a bit slow but I personally don’t have experience engaging with food industry, other people at the table have some, but I think it’s taken a while to probably come up with the working plan of what is the best approach to engage with that target group (Research 1)*  |
| Perspectives on the fidelity of the intervention  | Changes to the plans due to new knowledge and innovation | *Overall the partnership has been so open to trial and error and the level of innovation in terms of let’s try this and let’s try that. The resources that have been developed by the partnership for industry, we never envisaged that at the beginning. Who would have envisaged two years ago that we would have finished this project with a how to guide, benchmarking reports and grants? (NGO 6)*  |
| Changes to the target audience to effect more change | *We changed half way through in regards to our thinking around who we should target.... If we had been thinking at the start around how can we effect the most change and target the big ones with these food category reports and then how do we effect the most change in Victoria by providing tools and resources and contacts for small to medium, that would have been a nice round brand from the start (NGO 21)* |
| Perspectives on utility/ quality of the intervention      | 'Reformulation Readiness' Guide | *The reformulation readiness guide... I think that is a great resource that was put out... We had a lot of good feedback from different areas of our supply chain and food technologists around that guide, so just really helpful. (Industry 17)* |
| Industry-centred events | *It’s probably the first time we have seen a public health organisation run an industry event and be supportive... you understand the work we are doing and you’re willing to support it and highlight where companies are doing well (Industry 15)* |
| Case studies | *Smaller businesses... they need to see what we’re doing and they need to learn from us and if they see case studies from us, that can really help them shape their nutrition strategy, so I think it’s a positive for those other industry players and also consumers to see what we’re doing and obviously government to see what we’re doing (Industry 17)* |
| Benchmarking service | *The George Institute was offering those reports which could take one companies' products and compare it to the entire category... I think that’s really valuable as well because you know, all companies are going to be interested to know what their competitors are doing. (Industry 16)* |
| Reformulation grants | *The salt reduction grants, I think that’s showing really strong leadership and showing food manufacturers that there is support and there are resources available to do this. (NGO 6)* |
| One-to-one meetings | *We’ve been able to undertake over 2 one on one engagement meetings which have revealed a lot of insight and information around the drivers for reformulation and the current obstacles and issues that food manufacturers are still facing. (NGO 6)* |

Supplementary Table 2. Contextual factors affecting intervention design, delivery and outcomes.

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| **Contextual factors affecting outcomes** | **Theme** | **Quotes** |
| Policy environment      | Healthy Food Partnership's slow progress towards setting draft sodium targets    | *I feel like the advocacy activities probably have just added a strong supporter base around things that were in-train. A reformulation programme was being discussed, being designed, being consulted on. We could then put partnership responses in, the technical response that The George Institute put in, or just put the weight behind it – we need it fast, we need it to be a really comprehensive programme (SGSA 11)* |
| *I think we’ve certainly affected things that have been going on. The Healthy Food Partnership was there and we were able to offer commentary whenever we were asked, we offered support and we will continue... to kind of push that reformulation story with government. So, whilst we might not have seen policy change we’ve definitely continued the conversation and put support behind it, extra support behind it when we’ve been asked. (NGO 21)* |
| *It was challenging to get engagement because the food companies were waiting to find out what the salt reduction targets were going to be… the Heart Foundation, with our support, manages to identify a program of work to engage industry at the same time as waiting for the targets (Research 2)* |
| *Obviously the lag on the targets for the Healthy Food Partnership being set is has been a bit disappointing and obviously that’s outside the control of the group. Once those are in place you would think that that may heighten the activity of the food industry and manufacturers to reformulate and help to reach that outcome but again that’s still a while away you know. (Research 1)* |
| Alignment with state nutrition policies/ strategies (e.g. Healthy Choices) | *I don't think it's [salt] necessarily embedded in strategy at our government level... there's a few individuals that have really driven it and championed it which has been fantastic, but whether that's embedded in the strategy if they were to leave, I'm still not sure. (NGO 7)* |
| *In relation to the state-wide policies on food in institutional settings, it’s been a challenge to impact on those processes and also to know whether or not those policies are being implemented and whether or not they are also incorporating salt in those policies...we didn’t have any direct access to those institutional settings (Research 1)* |
| Political climate     | Salt is not a current government priority  | *There’s been some good work but as a whole probably hasn’t quite had the impact at the state and federal level as we would have wanted, and that’s not necessarily because of the fault of any of the partners, it’s partly because of the political conversations and agendas out where salt is and you can’t make an issue popular with politicians if they don’t want it to be and there’s not a public push... so the politicians have been able to kind of ignore it (SGSA 10)* |
| *We obviously wanted policy change. We have had a government in ... it’s not the highest thing on their priority list (NGO 21)* |
| Lack of policy window in the intervention time period   | *It would have to do with the fact that what we’re trying to do was trying to move a mountain and that’s a very difficult thing to do when you’re just a group of mountaineers... The reality is it’s still a priority, it needs to be a priority and like in tobacco control or any other public health area, often it can take twenty or thirty years for the advocacy really to reach a critical mass and then find a sympathetic minister or a sympathetic government or a sympathetic community and the timing is right and suddenly you get an opportunity… A lot of success of public health has time to build and a long time to make the business case, and then the policy window opens, and that’s the opportunity there. (SGSA 13)* |
| *And sometimes you’ve just got to go with what the political climate’s going to let you do, and both with industry and politicians and sometimes you- it’s not your day or year or your decade and you can’t change everything unfortunately. (SGSA 10)* |
| Social factors    | Crowded nutrition space   | *The reality is that the broad community debate on this issues have usually been dominated by issues of a sugar tax or health levy on sugary drinks and the role of sugar as a driver of the obesity epidemic in recent years, and I think to that extent the partnership and the salt focus was always going to struggle to get cut through, but it doesn’t mean that it’s a failure it just means that it’s a competitive environment for community engagement on food and I think there’s been some good progress made by the partnership in general community awareness, engaging with the industry, engagement with policy makers as well but that’s against the backdrop of broadly a lack of recognition of salt as a population health priority in the Australian context (SGSA 13)* |
| *Sugar was much more of a top of mind issue for many, particularly consumers, but also for industry and even government to some degree, or the political end of the spectrum. (NGO 7)* |
| Perceived value of a single nutrient approach  | *Not everyone in Victoria, and in Victoria healthy eating sector would support a salt reduction approach... nutrient-specific projects are not really what they’re at the moment, prioritising. (SGSA 11)* |
| *I’ve always been a very strong internal advocate in the food and nutrition space and particularly around the need for a focus on salt reduction and it has been one issue that really was becoming a little problematic was this broader issue that’s run by nutritionists, in general, dietitians I should say, about the fact that we shouldn’t focus on single nutrients. (NGO 8)* |
| Environmental factors  | The broader food environment | *Everyone in Australia gets 7% of their salt or 8% of their salt from packaged foods and restaurant foods (Research 4)* |
| Technological factors    | Technology as a barrier to reformulation   | *Barriers are taste, technology is to do it... consumer acceptance, quality because salt, it provides a technical role, not just boosting flavours, though that’s definitely a factor. (Industry 17)* |
| *There’s things that we can do and there’s things that we can’t do... also the implications of reformulation, what do we replace it with, if anything, and is that more or less harmful than the original. From our perspective if we ask the food industry to reformulate in a short period of time, they can only use the technology that’s available to them, but you know doesn’t give them time to look for other options and you may get a food supply flooded with things that you don’t want. And that's what we are very mindful of and we’re very concerned... we try not to put other things in that may not be necessarily a better option. (Industry 18)* |
| *We also have joint research programs... to try and use different technologies so we can get the sodium down but still in a good taste. (Industry 19)* |
| Other factors affecting the food industry's ability to reformulate            | Functional role of salt in food   | *In many cases, especially in extrusion and in other types of crisping, there’s only so much you can take out before the product no longer resembles its form (Industry 18)* |
| *In some other industries... you need salt for a functional benefit, and also in some of the products we do like crackers where sodium bicarbonate is used as a raising agent, it's sometimes very hard then to get products low in acid sodium. Sodium can be used either alone or in combination with other things like sodium bicarbonate, like a functional base, like a raising agent. (Industry 19)* |
| *There is a sweet spot where manufacturers can take out small amounts of sodium without too negatively affecting taste and function, and I think responsible food producers are working towards achieving that. In order to go further, which is really becoming creative with ingredients and flavours and so on to reduce the sodium, but still maintain terrifically tasty products for consumers... If they don’t have the food science product development teams to work with ingredients and flavours and so on to produce outstanding products with taste, with low sodium... they will need is possibly assistance or direction with, and exposure to a skillset and information that will allow them to explore product development and reformulation at low sodium target levels, with the skills that they will need. (Industry 14)* |
| Feasibility of removing salt from food   | *In the company’s that I have worked for or consulted to, they have literally just removed the sodium because their products aren’t very complicated, they haven’t had to look for alternatives. (Industry 16)* |
| *The thing with salt is that it’s easier to remove and replace salt than it is to remove and replace sugar. So you know it is something that you can do by stealth and train the palate slowly, slowly to get used to. And you know because there is very little bulk in salt it’s just easier to take out than some of the other ingredients. (Industry 18)*  |
| Skills and expertise to reformulate    | *Understanding that some, especially the smaller manufacturers, might need some skilled food science and product development help in reformulating lower sodium, but still maintaining amazing mouth feel and taste. (Industry 14)* |
| *Companies now employing dieticians and registered nutritionists. That’s important that they acknowledge that they need that level of expertise and science within their company to help guide them, to help guide their leadership team to what they should be doing from a health perspective (Industry 17)* |
| *The big players are the ones who are doing a lot in that space because they’ve got the resource, like we’ve got a dedicated nutrition team, a dedicated regulatory team, a sustainable nutrition team, we’ve got the resources whereas I know the smaller businesses don’t and they need to see what we’re doing and they need to learn from us (Industry 17)* |
| *There’s a huge gap in resources and huge gaps in capabilities. Even the large manufacturers who we naively thought had the capabilities do not have well resourced nutrition units within their organisations (NGO 6)* |
| Cost of reformulating   | *I think cost is a massive issue. Buying salt replacements is more expensive than putting salt in and it’s just how willing people are to be able to take a hit on growth margins, and if you do it slowly by stealth then you’re in a better position (Industry 18)* |
| *Every single reformulation that you do requires a project, requires resources, requires trial time, requires trial managing, requires package changes, it’s a very expensive exercise. (Industry 18)* |
| *Salt is a cheap ingredient and it can be that as we reduce salt, the costs go up. (Industry 2)* |