



## Event report: Tackling obesity - Triple-win policies for healthy and sustainable food environments

Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2019, Philippines Room, FAO/CFS

### Introduction

On the side lines of the 46<sup>th</sup> meeting of the [Committee on World Food Security](#) (CFS46), [World Obesity](#), [UNICEF](#), Ministry of Health Brazil and [Gehl](#) organized a side event. The meeting, chaired by Anna Lartey, Director of Nutrition and Food Systems Division at FAO, was attended by over 60 people and was an opportunity to raise awareness of the role of obesogenic environments in driving malnutrition in all its forms, and in turn the opportunities for addressing these within the context of CFS, a forum historically focused on hunger. The key question explored in the event was: what are the win-win solutions to mitigate the threats posed by food systems to human and planetary health?

### Session 1: Presenting the triple win policies and innovative approaches for tackling obesity

Our knowledge of obesogenic environments has leapt forward in the last decade. We now have a deeper understanding of the incentives to overconsume, the design of food environments, and the underlying systems that are creating the rising global health crisis.

*Anna Lartey (FAO Division of Nutrition and Food Systems)* reiterated in her welcoming remarks the huge economic impact of obesity on society and highlighted “poor diets” as the key driving factor of the current obesity epidemic. In this context, she spoke about FAO’s next biennial theme (i.e. Promoting healthy diets and preventing all forms of malnutrition), World Food Day (WFD) 2019 “healthy diets for a #Zerohunger world”, FAO/WHO guiding principles of sustainable, healthy diets that were just released on WFD, the support given to the action networks that are being formed by countries under the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition and FAO’s support to countries with developing food-based dietary guidelines.

*Hannah Brinsden (World Obesity Federation and Lancet Commission on Obesity)* highlighted the challenge of rising obesity globally, particularly in emerging economies which are also seeing the high levels of undernutrition and are at most risk of food insecurity as a result of climate change. The [Lancet Commission report on the Global Syndemic](#) highlights the shared systemic drivers – food, transport, urban systems - which underpin these three issues and that need to be addressed. Thinking in Syndemic terms can help join up silos between different groups, identify complementary policies, share tangible actions and harness double and triple win innovations to address obesity, as well as undernutrition and climate change.

*Gisele Bortolini (Ministry of Health, Brazil)* presented their policy work in Brazil to address obesity and improve food environments from a public policy perspective, considering the current food, nutrition and epidemiologic trends of the Brazilian population, especially regarding the increasing and alarming consumption of ultra-processed foods in early ages. Tackling obesity requires a comprehensive approach, acknowledging that healthy diets are a direct result of socially and environmentally sustainable food system. The Brazilian Dietary Guidelines were highlighted as an innovative approach to dietary recommendations. The guidelines are based on the extent and purpose of food processing, and consider the improvement of food systems and of supply chains in order to provide healthier and more sustainable dietary practices and food policies. In addition, Ms Bortolini also mentioned other broader and cost-effective measures such as taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages and ultra-processed foods, regulating the marketing of ultra-processed foods for children and adolescents, regulating

school environments and promoting adequate nutritional labeling to reduce the consumption of ultra-processed foods and to prevent and control obesity.

*Sophia Schuff (Gehl)* highlighted the fact that tackling childhood obesity, like other urban challenges, can be done through a public life approach to behavior change. Gehl's research shows that food consumption habits and decisions aren't only about food, but sometimes about the design and planning of the public realm and the city itself. Through collecting data on people in their daily lives, and talking to people in their local context, Gehl creates effective and personalised strategies for piloting interventions, measuring continuously, and scaling impact quickly. For example, in London we worked with local youth to tackle childhood obesity. Through our data collection process, we have learned that young people need a better public realm and that we must reintroduce civic amenities to young people's lives who are lacking in activities to engage in. Therefore, our interventions are about providing new walking and cycling routes, bringing active mobility back into young people's lives and improving high street bus stops in order to decrease the amount of young people eating fast food as a way to kill time afterschool while waiting for the bus. By understanding how and why youth make decisions, interventions can directly impact their habits.

*Jo Jewell (UNICEF)* presented the latest editions of UNICEF's [State of the World's Children](#) report which focused on nutrition, particularly the triple burden of overweight/obesity, undernutrition and hunger in the context of climate change, globalization and other major transitions. The report highlighted that 1 in 3 children worldwide are not growing well, due in large part to food systems that are failing children. One consequence is rapidly rising prevalence of obesity in all regions, including Africa. UNICEF is scaling up its work on overweight and obesity prevention in response. Improving children's food environments so that they promote and support healthy diets is central to UNICEF's approach. To support countries ensure healthy options are affordable, available, convenient and desirable, UNICEF will advocate for countries to introduce several key regulatory measures, including school food standards, restrictions on the marketing of foods to children, clear and easy to understand front of pack labelling and taxes on sugary drinks. UNICEF is uniquely positioned to advocate for a children's rights approach, and will work with other partners to mobilize more countries to take action.

## Session 2: Group work to discuss challenges and solutions for tackling obesity in different contexts

Participants were encouraged to discuss the challenges and innovative solutions to obesity from the perspective of their work and country. The key issues discussed for each of these questions are summarised below.

The key challenges related to obesity were wide ranging, drawing on transitions, attitudes, and food access.

- **Highly-processed food** is a key concern due to high availability, price, marketing, and particularly the increase in availability seen in LMICs.
- **Concentrated power in multinational food and beverage companies** often undermines policy development.
- **A lack of universally accepted definition of a healthy diet** presents challenges for governments when defining the scope and implementing policies
- **The silos between different areas** of food, nutrition, agriculture and health communities was highlighted as an underpinning challenge to progress.
- **Culture and social considerations** such as the lack of time to cook, inadequate knowledge and education, overemphasis on individual responsibility and inconsistent information for consumers.
- **Attitudes and understanding of obesity** are challenging, particularly related to a lack of understanding of obesity and its drivers which perpetuate stigma in different ways in different context and lead governments to look for individual-oriented solutions instead of structural and societal transformations.
- **Government priorities** in tackling the double burden are still often predominantly oriented to stunting prevention, and this can undermine efforts to prevent all forms of malnutrition where there is a lack of

incentive to prevent obesity. In contexts of multiple forms of malnutrition, it is no longer acceptable to only work on undernutrition.

- **No single magic bullet for the prevention of overweight and obesity**, but many policies will be effective if implemented in combination. Simply promoting healthy diets and lifestyles (e.g. through media and public awareness) will not be sufficient.
- **Urbanization and shift in wealth** is particularly evident in countries with the biggest rise in obesity, with a transition from rural to urban and lack of places for children to socialize, exercise and eat healthily.
- **Lack of funding and prioritisation** of obesity by global health funders, government donors and philanthropies .

A number of priority solutions were identified, particularly focused on regulations, cross-sectoral policies, knowledge and framing of obesity.

- **Subsidise nutritious foods that contribute to a healthy diet** in order to make them cheaper than fast food and, therefore, more accessible to low-income families and young people.
- **Make safe urban spaces** for sport and youth socialising, to make healthier options easier to access and reduce habitual consumption.
- **Teach children about food and equip them with skills** around healthy eating to increase awareness, empower them to make changes, and build engagement with local agriculture and food sources.
- **Shift focus away from individual responsibility**, instead focusing on the societal and commercial determinants of health, and government responsibility.
- **Implement multiple legal interventions and interdisciplinary action** to address multiple elements of the food system and the upstream drivers of diets.
- **Explore different ways to frame obesity** and its consequences, specifically targeted at LMICs to increase government commitment.
- **Explore the whole value chain**. Currently focused at a consumer level in obesity policy, but more needed on supply side.
- **A greater emphasis on a rights-based approach**, embedded across institutions in a cross-sectoral way.

## Conclusions

It was agreed that more work needs to be done to address obesity alongside other forms of malnutrition in order to meet the 2025 WHO targets for obesity and 2030 SDG target to end malnutrition in all its forms, and that food systems are a key mechanism to do this. Framing obesity to gain buy-in from different stakeholders, including donors and governments in countries with new levels of rising obesity, is important. Exploring the links between obesity and climate change and undernutrition and addressing the underlying systemic drivers will be vital to for making meaningful and sustainable change.