

UNHEALTHY DIETS NOW RANK ABOVE TOBACCO GLOBAL AS CAUSE OF PREVENTABLE DISEASES

## Battling unhealthy food requires tobacco-style response

By Nathan Gray+, 16-May-2014

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**The international community must develop a global convention similar to the legal framework for tobacco control to fight diet-related ill health, warn Consumers International and the World Obesity Federation.**

The two international membership bodies will call on governments to make a binding commitment to introduce a raft of policy measures designed to help consumers make healthier choices and improve nutrition security for everyone, as part of new recommendations.

*"If obesity was an infectious disease we would have seen billions of dollars being invested in bringing it under control,"* said Dr Tim Lobstein, director of policy at the World Obesity Federation. *"But because obesity is largely caused by the overconsumption of fatty and sugary foods, we have seen policy-makers unwilling to take on the corporate interests who promote these foods."*

Speaking to Food Navigator, Lobstein said the recommendations encourage governments to 'act collectively to tackle obesity and chronic disease.'

*"We know that the multinational food industry can pick smaller countries off one at a time, undermining government policies by using their economic muscle. A global Convention helps strengthen government resolve to implement their public health duties, as we have seen with the Tobacco Convention."*

*"Governments need to take collective action and a framework convention offers them the chance to do this,"* he warned.



Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, echoed calls for a new global agreement to regulate unhealthy diets: *"Just as the world came together to regulate the risks of tobacco, a bold framework convention on adequate diets must now be agreed."*

### 'Comparable to cigarettes'

The recommendations - [found here](#) , and due to be presented at the World Health Assembly in Geneva this week – call for measures including stricter controls on food marketing, improving the provision of nutrition information, requiring reformulation of unhealthy food products, raising standards for food provided in public institutions and using economic tools to influence consumption patterns.

*"The scale of the impact of unhealthy food on consumer health is comparable to the impact of cigarettes,"* commented Consumers International director general Amanda Long. *"The food and beverage industry has dragged its feet on meaningful change and governments have felt unable or unwilling to act."*

*"The only answer remaining for the global community is a framework convention and we urge governments to seriously consider our recommendations for achieving that,"* she commented.

*"If they do not, we risk decades of obstruction from industry and a repeat of the catastrophic global health crisis caused by smoking."*

De Schutter added that the world must 'come together just as it did to regulate the risks of tobacco - warning that *"a bold framework convention on adequate diets must now be agreed."*

*"Unhealthy diets are now a greater threat to global health than tobacco."*

## Fixing the food system?

*"Attempts to promote healthy diets will only work if the food systems underpinning them are put right," explained De Schutter. "Governments have been focusing on increasing calorie availability, but they have often been indifferent to what kind of calories are on offer, at what price, to whom they are accessible, and how they are marketed."*

De Schutter also drew attention to the role of breastmilk in infant nutrition, welcoming the recent moves towards regulating the advertising of milk formula in Hong Kong, the Philippines and other countries.

*"Governments should move forward with these measures, which are essential to ensure that people are protected from aggressive misinformation campaigns," he said. "They are also crucial to implement the WHO International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly recommendations, and are fully compatible with WTO rules."*

## Obesity epidemic

Lobstein noted that the global prevalence of obesity - defined as a BMI greater or equal to 30 - doubled between 1980 and 2008, to 10% of all men worldwide, and 14% of all women.

*"That's 205 million men and 297 million women - more than half a billion obese people," he said. "These figures show the scale of the problem to be addressed."*

Publication of the recommendations comes a decade after the publication of the WHO global strategy on diet and physical activity and health, which recognised the impact of unhealthy diet and lifestyle. Since then, however, global deaths attributable to obesity and overweight have risen from 2.6 million in 2005 to 3.4 million in 2010.

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