

## WN Feedback

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### *Big Food. Transitions in South-East Asia and China* **Fast food impact in the East**



*McDonald's and other foreign fast food chains have had an impact in South-East Asia and China, while plenty of local street and snack food is unhealthy. World Bank neglect also has had an impact*

**Barry Popkin writes:**

From my experience over many years now, observing nutritional and epidemiological shifts in China and Asia, here are a couple of comments on the *Update* pieces in the April *WN*, one by Claudio Schuftan on McDonald's opening in Vietnam (1), the other on the rise of fast food and obesity in China (2).

Away-from-home eating has significantly increased in much of South-East Asia, including Vietnam and China, since the 1990s. Even so, only a small proportion of this comes from modern western fast food chains. But a classic study done nearly 20 years ago by a group of anthropologists has shown that outlets of chains such as McDonalds have had a profound impact on the entire restaurant sector and the culture of eating in these countries (3).

In South-East Asia, it is cheaper to eat out than to cook at home. Much comes from little stalls spread across the cities such as Ho Chi Minh and Bangkok, or congregated in hawker centres in Singapore. Much of this is local and existed before McDonald's

ever reached the shores of these countries. It is not healthy eating. It is laden with saturated fat and sodium and very often deep-fried food.

That said, away-from-home eating needs to be kept separate from the larger forces changing the diets of Asia, in particular large-scale convenience stores and supermarket chains, and packaged food generally. This is not all foreign companies. There are plenty of Asian chain enterprises and branded foods and drinks. For instance, *ramen* noodles, a major source of saturated fat and sodium, is a regional food that is very unhealthy, convenient, and enormously popular in the region. Yes, Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, and other sugared soft drinks made by these corporations, have a lot to do with the sweetening of Asian diets, and also there are many local clones that are equally popular and much cheaper.

### ***World Bank neglect***

Now for the World Bank report on China (2,4). The report hits at issues relevant to China and all of South-East Asia. But it ignores the role of the World Bank itself, in developing cheap animal source foods, in distorting agriculture systems, and in shifting the relative price structure through huge subsidies and assistance in designing agriculture policies away from legumes, coarse grains, fruits and vegetables, toward oils, animal source foods and many refined products.

Also the report does not mention the World Bank's own many decades of neglect of obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases in its programmes and policies, across all low- and middle-income regions and countries. The authors only need to look at accounts from Brazil and China from earlier decades (5,6) to see they are just repeating these documents and not actively getting involved in creating solutions.

Yet it is never too late. Perhaps this report is a sign that the World Bank finally is now no longer denying that obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases are dominant threats to the well-being of low- and middle-income countries, and that the Bank needs to get actively involved in generating large-scale regulatory and economic policy development. Such a shift would be very important if it occurred, and was done with wisdom and use of existing knowledge. The recent Bellagio conference on this topic provides ample examples where the power of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund could have been, and even now could be, counterfoils to Big Food (7).

**Barry Popkin**

Department of Nutrition, University of  
North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

***Email: popkin@unc.edu***

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