

WN Update

World Nutrition Volume 5, Number 6, June 2014

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association

Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/



Development

Return to regulation, for world health



Olivier de Schutter completes six years as UN special rapporteur on the right to food. He says that current dominant food systems are broken, and must be properly regulated by elected governments

The Development team reports:

The call for a World Health Organization Framework Convention on food and health, following that on tobacco, is growing louder. It is now championed by many organisations convened by Consumers International and the World Obesity Federation. Why, is because the current world food system is broken – ‘deeply dysfunctional’, as says Olivier de Schutter (above) (1). He has now completed his second and final term as the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food.

After six years of travelling the world for his UN work, he sees the big picture. On 19 May, the first day of last month’s WHO World Health Assembly, he stated: ‘Attempts to promote healthy diets will only work if the food systems underpinning them are put right. 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 made available, and how they are marketed’ (2). His statement begins with the challenging claim that: ‘Unhealthy diets are now a greater threat to global health than tobacco’. He adds: ‘Just as the world came together to

regulate the risks of tobacco, a bold framework convention on adequate diets must now be agreed' (2).

Global convention for healthy diets

He issued his statement two days before the launch at the Geneva Press Club, chaired by Corinna Hawkes of the UK-based World Cancer Research Fund, of *Towards a Global Convention to Protect and Promote Healthy Diets* (3). This set of recommendations from Consumers International and World Obesity is derived and developed from proposals made by UK and European policy experts from professional and public health organisations.

The document is identified by Consumers International as a 'conversation starter', or as 'a catalyst for international debate and for the creation of a robust process that will culminate in a strong and effective agreement'. Like the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, it is meant as a basic specification to give member states scope for measures suitable for their circumstances. The recommendations are mostly designed to support consumer choice, and as stated in the document include:

- Education skills, communications and public awareness
- Provision of nutrition information
- Ensuring responsible food and beverage advertising, promotion and sponsorship
- Controls on advertising promotion and sponsorship to children
- Improved nutritional quality of food and reduced levels of potentially harmful nutrients
- Nutritional standards for food services in schools, hospitals and public institutions
- Interventions to influence positive consumption patterns

Supporters include the World Cancer Research Fund, and World Action on Salt and Health; the UK Health Forum, Faculty of Public Health, Royal Society for Public Health, and the Society for Social Medicine; the European Public Health Alliance, and the European Public Health Association. Boyd Swinburn, co-chair of World Obesity, present at the Press Club launch, also supports a framework convention.

Proposals for healthy food systems

Olivier de Schutter was also present at the launch. His proposals range wider. They are more concerned with supply, manufacture and food systems as a whole, as distinct from demand and consumer choice. Two of his five points below indicate the need for equitable food systems. Thus, with reference to an earlier document (4), his 19 May statement says: 'In his 2012 report...the Special Rapporteur identified five priority actions to address the issues of obesity and unhealthy diets' (2):

- Taxing unhealthy products
- Regulating foods high in saturated fats, salt and sugar
- Cracking down on junk food advertising

- Overhauling misguided agricultural subsidies that make certain ingredients cheaper than others
- Supporting local food production so that consumers have access to healthy, fresh and nutritious foods

Olivier de Schutter also refers to the need for regulation of transnational and other huge food product industries. Thus on new moves to regulate advertising of infant formula in Hong Kong, the Philippines and elsewhere, he says: ‘Governments should move forward with these measures, which are essential to ensure that people are protected from aggressive misinformation campaigns’. He adds, as a lawyer: ‘Suggestions that these steps could violate World Trade Organization law by restricting international trade, are simply false’ (2).

In a report to the UN Human Rights Council submitted in January this year (5), he states: ‘We have entered a new century, and the questions we now face are different from those of 50 years ago. A new paradigm based on well-being, resilience and sustainability must be designed, to replace the productivist paradigm’. In an earlier 2011 report (1) he states: ‘Food systems must ensure the access of all to sustainable diets, defined as diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy, while optimising natural and human resources’...

He continues: ‘Following... the North American Free Trade Agreement, US companies massively increased investments in the Mexican food processing industry (from \$US 210 million in 1987 to \$US 5.3 billion on 1999) and sales of processed foods in Mexico soared at an annual rate of 5 to 10 per cent in the period from 1995 to 2003. The resulting rise in soft drink and snack consumption by Mexican children is at the source of the very high rates of child obesity in the country’.

Development



Beginning in this issue, *WN* will be publishing contributions with the general heading of *Development*. Initially these will mainly be concerned with the new UN strategy to promote sustainable development in the 2015-2030 period. As here, they will also examine what forms development can take in order to be and remain sustainable. The next issues of *WN* will also look forward to the second UN International Conference on Nutrition this coming November, convened by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization, with support from other UN and associated agencies.

Further: ‘The power of the agrifood industry to influence diets has been well documented, and the public budgets for nutrition education are no match for the

advertising budgets of fast food and sweet beverage companies... The promotion of foods that are known to have detrimental health effects should [not] be allowed to continue unimpeded: these products reduce the life expectancy in particular of the poorest segment of the population, who are also the least nutritionally literate...'

He adds: 'An international framework, in the form of an international code of conduct regulating the marketing of food and beverages in support of national efforts, might be desirable in order to take into account the international nature of commercial promotion of energy-dense, micronutrient-poor food and beverages'.

The findings of Olivier de Schutter's 2012 report referred to above (4) are summarised in a media release issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on 6 March 2012 (6). (See Box 1, below).

Box 1

'The public health disaster of bad diets'

This is taken from the media release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on 6 March 2012 (5), referring to the report by Olivier de Schutter published on that day (4). This includes the five points in his statement on 19 May 2014 (2).

'Our food systems create sick people' warned today United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food... We need to tackle the systemic problems which generate poor nutrition... However, we continue to prescribe remedies like a doctor: nutrition pills and early-life strategies for those lacking in calories; slimming pills, lifestyle advice and calorie counting for the overweight'...

'We have deferred to food companies the responsibility for ensuring that a good nutritional balance emerges. Voluntary guidelines and piecemeal nutrition initiatives have failed to create a system with the right signals, and the odds remain stacked against the achievement of a healthy, balanced diet', he said.

The Special Rapporteur also identified the abundance of processed food as a major threat to improving nutrition. 'Heavy processing thrives in our global food system, and is a win-win for multinational agri-food companies. Processed items can be produced and distributed on a huge scale, thanks to cheap subsidized ingredients and their increased shelf life'. 'But for the people, it is a lose-lose', he stressed. 'Heavily processed foods lead to diets richer in saturated and trans-fatty acids, salt, and sugars. Children become hooked on the junk foods targeted at them. In better-off countries, the poorest population groups are most affected, because foods high in fats, sugar and salt are often cheaper than healthy diets, as a result of wrong-headed subsidies whose health impacts have been wholly ignored...'

'The West is now exporting diabetes and heart disease to developing countries, along with the processed foods on the shelves of global supermarkets. By 2030, more than 5 million people will die each year before the age of 60 from non-communicable diseases linked to diets. 'We should not simply invest our hopes in medicalizing our diets with enriched products, or changing people's choices through health warnings. Ambitious, targeted nutrition strategies can work, but only if the food systems underpinning them are put right'.

On the initiative announced on 19 May, World Obesity director of policy Tim Lobstein states: '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. Governments need to take collective action and a Framework Convention offers them the chance to do this.'

There is another way. A group led by the O'Neill Institute for International and Global Health Law in the US propose a wider-ranging policy, not on food including health, but on health including food. Published by WHO last year (7), they call for a global convention on health 'to eliminate gross health inequities', saying 'substantial improvements in health would be achieved through a population-based strategy based on the essential conditions for the public's health'.

References

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To be continued...

At the EAT Forum held in Stockholm at the end of May it was announced that Olivier de Schutter, and Olivia Yambi of Tanzania (previously of UNICEF), are the two co-chairs of the newly formed Carasso Foundation International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems. We will be hearing more from Olivier de Schutter. Watch this space...

The Development team. Return to regulation, for world health.
[Update]. *World Nutrition* June 2014, **5, 6**, 511-515