

EDITORIAL

Acting on the challenges for food and nutrition in the WHO European Region: where are we and where next?

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While many Member States in the WHO European Region have made great progress in recent years with actions to promote healthy diets and prevent obesity, the scale of the problem remains alarming in all countries, and a number of major obstacles and implementation gaps remain. These must be addressed if WHO and countries are collectively to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the health targets governments have set themselves.

Relevant goals include global commitments to halt the rise in obesity, reduce diet-related risk factors for noncommunicable diseases and eliminate the remaining pockets of undernutrition in countries in the Region. Increasingly, policy-makers and experts alike speak of the need for “food system transformations” to achieve these, requiring solutions that target multiple sectors and actors at all stages of food production and consumption. These will help transform the availability and affordability of healthier food for those who need it most, and deliver the type of impact needed on health and health-related behaviours.

At the same time, taking a systems approach will ensure that what is good for health is also good for wider dimensions of sustainability, such as reducing the harmful environmental impact of modern large-scale food production and consumption. A further important dimension is the health-system response

to obesity and unhealthy diets. The costs to governments from treating the consequences of obesity and unhealthy diets are already high and will continue to grow. Ensuring that health systems are equipped to respond in a cost-effective way is critical.

For some readers what is being proposed may sound alarmist. When the data are examined carefully, however, they reveal that obesity is either rapidly increasing or stabilizing at very high levels in almost all countries in the Region, and dietary behaviours remain far from optimal. The latest results from the ongoing Global Burden of Disease Study show that unhealthy diet is responsible for one in every five deaths globally; this figure soars when high body mass index (BMI) and other forms of maternal and child malnutrition are included. The relative importance of both unhealthy diets and risks from high BMI has thus increased significantly since previous analyses were performed. This indicates that countries are well off-track to achieve targets and that, despite increasing political attention and policy action, more needs to be done – urgently. A forthcoming review of policy implementation across Europe¹ in the area of

¹ *Better food and nutrition in Europe: a progress report monitoring policy implementation in the WHO European Region.* WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2017.

food and nutrition indicates that improvements are needed in both the breadth and depth of policy implementation across all countries.

This special issue of *Public Health Panorama*, “Turning the tide on obesity and unhealthy diets”, is thus extremely timely. At the midway point in implementation of the WHO European Food and Nutrition Action Plan 2015–2020, the articles provide some relevant insights into the broad range of challenges countries face in this area, alongside effective solutions. They align well with some of the WHO Regional Office for Europe’s priority objectives in this area, notably:

- creating healthy food and drink environments;
- promoting the gains of a healthy diet throughout life, especially for the most vulnerable groups;
- reinforcing health systems to promote healthy diets;
- supporting surveillance, monitoring, evaluation and research; and
- strengthening governance, alliances and networks to ensure a health-in-all-policies approach.

The importance of food environments in influencing people’s food preferences, dietary behaviours and health outcomes has been well articulated in the literature, and a suite of policies is now recognized as essential for creating healthy food environments. This special issue includes articles that explore the importance of food marketing restrictions in ensuring that children are free from the harmful impact of promotions for fatty, salty and sugary foods, alongside papers looking at the importance of clear, consumer-friendly, front-of-pack labelling in helping people make healthy food choices. It also contains articles examining the role of taxes on sugary drinks and the importance of public procurement in ensuring that food available in schools and other public institutions is healthy and – wherever possible – sustainable. Collectively, these papers demonstrate the continuing need to improve the day-to-day contexts in which people make decisions about food by influencing the relative availability, affordability and appeal of healthy options.

At the same time, the importance of nutrition across the life-course is becoming ever clearer. In particular maternal nutrition before *and* during pregnancy, as well as optimal infant and young children feeding practices for the first two years of life, are demonstrated to have a significant influence on later risk of

noncommunicable diseases and obesity. Tailored policies and interventions targeting each different stage of the life-course are therefore needed. Articles in this special issue examine the rapid increase in overweight and obesity among children and adolescents, notably in the eastern part of the Region. Understanding the most relevant dietary and environmental factors underlying this change will help policy-makers to better tailor effective interventions.

The health system also plays an important role in promoting healthy diets and weight management, but transformations are required in service delivery and the scope of practice for health professionals. Matters under discussion in this special issue include ways to meet the training and development needs of health professionals – notably in terms of supporting long-term weight management, motivational interviewing and behaviour change. Another paper considers the most appropriate non-surgical interventions for patients with severe and medically complicated obesity.

Surveillance, monitoring and evaluation also emerge strongly in this special issue. The value of surveillance, such as via the WHO European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative and the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children survey, is clearly demonstrated both in helping countries to keep track of the situation and in informing national policy discussions. Finally, many articles highlight challenges to policies from different stakeholders who perceive that they will be negatively affected by them. The importance of good governance, clear and transparent processes, rigorous evidence reviews and cross-sectoral work is strongly underlined throughout.

We hope you find this special issue to be relevant and informative to your work. The process of developing it has been enlightening, with many excellent submissions from across the whole Region. Had we had unlimited space, we could easily have included many more articles to demonstrate the great work in different corners of Europe. As it is, this issue provides a mere snapshot of the ongoing efforts to grapple with what is undoubtedly one of the most pressing health challenges at this point in time. The WHO Regional Office for Europe remains supportive of and available to Member States as they make progress towards promoting healthier diets and preventing obesity in the years to come. ■