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World leaders must take binding steps to curb unhealthy food industry – UN expert



Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter

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A United Nations human rights expert today called for taxing unhealthy food, regulating harmful marketing practices and standing up to the food industry, urging world leaders not to miss the chance at a summit next week to end a state of affairs that kills nearly 3 million adults each year.

“Voluntary guidelines are not enough. World leaders must not bow to industry pressure,” Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier De Schutter said in a [statement](#) on the eve of the 19-20 September high-level General Assembly meeting on curbing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease and stroke, and chronic lung disease, which are influenced by modifiable lifestyle risk factors such as the consumption of processed foods.

“It is crucial for world leaders to counter food industry efforts to sell unbalanced processed products and ready-to-serve meals too rich in trans fats and saturated fats, salt and sugars. Food advertising is proven to have a strong impact on children, and must be strictly regulated in order to avoid the development of bad eating habits early in life.”

Mr. De Schutter noted that the globalization of food supply chains means an increased supply of junk food such as energy-rich, nutrient-poor products processed with trans fats to ensure a long shelf life – which are particularly attractive to poor consumers because they are cheap – with “dramatic” consequences for public health, affecting disproportionately those with the lowest incomes.

According to the UN World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), at least 2.8 million adults die each year as a result of being overweight or obese, with 44 per cent of diabetes, 23 per cent of ischaemic heart disease and from 7 to 41 per cent of certain cancers attributable to these factors.

Mr. De Schutter noted that unhealthy diets are one of the reasons why public health expenditures increased by 50 per cent over the past 10 years in member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

He warned against a failure to act decisively at next week’s General Assembly meeting, only the second ever to deal with health (the first was HIV/AIDS), which at least 34 heads of State and government, 50 other leading government ministers and many specialists are expected to attend.

“World leaders are about to miss a once-in-a-generation opportunity to crack down on the marketing practices and public policy gaps which contribute to unhealthy diets and consign people to debilitating diseases,” he said.

He cited the need to tackle farm policies that make some foods more available than others, for example by providing subsidies that encourage production of grains rich in carbohydrates but relatively poor in micronutrients at the expense of fruits and vegetables.

“If we are serious about tackling the rise of cancer and heart disease, we need to make ambitious, binding commitments to tackle one of the root causes – the food that we eat,” he said. “It is unacceptable that when lives are at stake, we go no further than soft, promotional measures that ultimately rely on consumer choice, without addressing the supply side of the food chain.”

Outlining the aims of the high-level meeting at a news conference in New York yesterday, WHO Assistant Director-General Ala Alwan noted that NCDs cause over 63 per cent of all the world’s deaths, with the modifiable risk factors including tobacco, alcohol and lack of exercise as well as unhealthy food products.

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