

Research Report

Economic and Social Council

Combating obesity and improving human nutrition



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Forum	Economic and Social Council
Issue:	Combating obesity and improving human nutrition
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Introduction

Decades ago, when the first claims of an impending pandemic of obesity were first heard, they were not taken seriously. At that time, people were just about moving away from home-made foods. Especially in MEDCs, places like drive-through fast food restaurants and take-away meals were becoming more and more popular. When asking people who are obsessed with fast foods why they love them, ease is a commonly used argument. When wealth increases, people tend to become lazy which then naturally translates into the embracing of unhealthy foods. The fact that obesity is largely a problem in MEDCs and emerging economies is not a strange one, as the enlarged wealth enables these individuals to eat as much as they like.

Although recently, certain initiatives were set up to improve human nutrition, malnutrition is still a lucrative part of the food industry. Naturally, companies making money in this part of the economy will keep on trying to sell their products.

Fast foods and quick snacks have also become something that exhibits wealth to some extent. For example, in certain parts of Asia, going to fast-food restaurants improves your social status. Of course, companies make use of this social position.

Due to the fact that malnutrition has become such a commodity, it is no longer straightforward to choose that which is best for your health. People are often blinded by things the food industry say and tend to believe everything presented to them. This has caused the food industry to become a very influential revenue-driven industry, which cares less and less for human health.

Definition of Key Terms

Obesity

A medical condition in which the accumulation of body fat can lead to negative effects regarding a person's health. Someone is considered obese when his/her BMI (Body Mass Index) exceeds 30kg/m^2 .

Fast Food

Food that is prepared and served very quickly. First popularized in the 1950s in the United States. Fast food is often food with low nutritious values and large amounts of (saturated) fat. Fast food has been known to be a big contributor to the issue of obesity over the past half century.

Malnutrition

A condition that is caused by a diet in which certain nutrients are lacking or in excess.

General Overview

Throughout human history we have seen that the worsening of human nutrition is paired with economic progress. In medieval times, it was even a sign of being from a wealthy family to be obese. People would try to become as obese as possible, to socially segregate them from other layers of society. Of course, today we know that bad nutrition can cause serious health issues and this is also the public perception. This has unfortunately not always been the general point of view. It was as late as the 1980s, when the first official reports on obesity were made reflecting the harm obesity has on human health. These reports came from the USA, where the first fast-food restaurant was established back in 1912. Also in Europe, concerns of the increasing weight of the population were voiced. It was immediately visible that this increasing obesity was paired with the economic success of both continents, which was now increasingly seen as something negative as opposed to the ideas of medieval times. Not only were diets worsening but physical activity was also drastically reduced.

Furthermore, food is becoming less nutritious: the human race consumes a lot of processed foods stuffed with high fructose corn syrup, refined flours, and trans fats. Lastly, soil is being squeezed. Industrial farming is removing a lot of the nutrients in countries' farmland, causing the produce to possess less nutrients than only two generations ago. Our

food industry has become, like most industries, one solely looking for the largest profit. Although this is often beneficial to a country's economy, it is not something that we as a human race would want, as it is affecting our health.

In the USA, more than half of certain gender-race-ethnic specific subpopulations were considered to be obese. Away-from-home eating became popular, which only helped the popularity of fast foods. Rather ironically, at that time, MEDC countries only believed that malnutrition was an issue within LEDCs. In MEDCs, people developed preferences for mechanically produced tastes without regard to their personal health. Despite major health challenges countries faced, few were serious about facing these dietary challenges. By 2008, obesity affected 1.5 million adults worldwide.

Obesity in low and middle-income countries

Although previously there was thought to be no obesity at all in LEDCs, some recent studies show an increase in obesity in these countries. This might be due to the fact that malnutrition has become a trend in the Western world and is slowly drifting over to other parts of the world.

Malnutrition is not the sole cause of obesity. Because of all the recent technological advances the world has made, physical activity in working and every-day life has become less straightforward. More and more machines take over daily work, leaving less physical activity for the human race. With the removal of this obligated physical exercise required in order to be able to survive, people actually have to search for a way to have enough activity for a healthy lifestyle. This is a challenge for some and it can lead to obesity.

Today, it is crystal clear that our modern day civilization has an obesity problem. More and more internationally recognized parties are admitting to it. Although some would argue that acceptance of something is a good first step, not a lot is being done to combat the worsening issue of obesity. Diets from private companies are becoming popular, but governments are not backing any. None of the diets in existence today have been proven to be able to relieve the issue of obesity on a large scale. This is often due to the fact that these diets are being put forward by companies that ask for a serious premium, as these diets are endorsed by celebrities. It then seems that they do not genuinely care about the health of their customers, but more about revenue. This is of course not surprising, as this is generally always the goal of a company in a free market economy. Therefore local governments or UN bodies could initiate certain projects which combat obesity, funded by governments or the UN, as opposed to the people that suffer from obesity paying a large sum of money for a diet with no official verification. This has however not been done. All that has been done thus far

has been the reporting of the problem, yet this was already being done in the 1980s. It would seem that now is the appropriate moment for UN involvement before the issue gets out of hand.

The companies within the food-industry that are making money from malnutrition such as fast food companies, can freely continue their business without having to abide by any sort of 'nutrition rules' or having to pay any form of taxes. It seems strange, as these companies are harming human health, just like companies selling cigarettes or alcohol. Those companies however, need to abide by certain rules and are not allowed to advertise, something that the aforementioned companies are still allowed to do as any other company is.

Due to this lack of governmental control, the obesity problem still exists today, more evidently than ever. It is not being recognized that obesity and malnutrition are linked.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

World Health Organization

An agency of the United Nations that is concerned with international public health. The objective is "the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health". It was established in 1948, its predecessor was the Health Organisation. The WHO aims at establishing partnerships in those areas where attention for public health is needed. The WHO attempts to shape the global research agenda. It stimulates the generation of knowledge of matters such as the curing of diseases, development of medicine, improvement of treatment and more. The WHO aims to be a go-to organisation for any public health related issues or innovations.

United States of America

The USA was the first country in which obesity was recognized on a large scale. The United States was also considered to be the birthplace of fast food, a significant factor contributing to obesity. Most initiatives that are trying to improve nutrition and reduce obesity originate from the United States. The United States government have, albeit marginally, recognized the issue and promised a solution.

Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

A non-profit research and public policy organization devoted to improving the world's diet, preventing obesity, and reducing weight stigma. The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity holds industries and government agencies responsible for safeguarding public health. The institute researches obesity independently.

Global Alliance for the Prevention of Obesity and Related Chronic Disease

An alliance for the combating of obesity, particularly in children, was established between five NGOs whose main focus was the combating of chronic diseases. These organisations are formally linked to the WHO (World Health Organisation). The alliance actively attempts to implement the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. It furthermore encourages wide stakeholders with regards to nutrition to invest in the cooperation between each other when undertaking actions and responses. Lastly, the alliance focuses on the creation of models, focusing on the prevention of childhood obesity.

Timeline of Events

Visible below, is how quickly this issue evolved. Malnutrition was recognized only at a rather late moment, meaning that it was able to get out of hand very quickly.

Date	Description of event
1912	First Fast Food restaurant
1950s	Popularity of fast food increased, mostly in the USA
1980s	Obesity firstly recognised in the USA, and shortly after this in Europe
2008	Over 1.5 million adults affected by obesity.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

There has been a lot of UN involvement on the issue of malnutrition, but only regarding the situations in LEDCs combating lack of nutrition. This complete other side of the issue, which is our issue, has not often been officially debated by the United Nations.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health

A strategy that tackles two large risk factors for diseases: diet and physical activity. The Strategy also compliments the long-term work carried out by the WHO, mainly focusing on under nutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and infant- and young-child feeding. Although this is not the issue that is the one this research report covers.

Bellagio Conference on Law, Nutrition & Obesity

A conference held in the year of 2007 to investigate in which ways existing laws actually applied to the subject of nutrition. World leaders in public health, nutrition and law from key countries came together to achieve a higher standard in global nutrition. The topic was the attempt to draft new legislation to prevent obesity across the world. The topics included increasing the control on the marketing of food products with regards to children, regulating food ingredients and additives, regulating conduct and correctly labeling food and beverages with information such as the nutritional values, and the overall need for global attention.

Officially (which means at a legally binding, international level), not a lot of real governmental or international attempts have been made to solve this issue. Private companies have helped in raising awareness for malnutrition by promoting various diets to some extent. These companies, as stated previously, have been known to launch these initiatives from a business point of view. They can thus not be considered as real attempts to solve the issue, merely as means to raise awareness.

Possible Solutions

Delegates should understand that it is of utmost importance that this issue is solved quickly, seriously and adequately. The facts available do not lie: the issue of malnutrition and obesity is only increasing more and more rapidly. When handling this issue, awareness should be present for the fact that it is not only an issue of MEDCs but more than ever, also that of LEDCs. The UN should bundle the powers of its member states in order to draft binding legislation and have it signed and ratified as soon as possible. The UN Economic and Social Council should ensure that the process of reversing malnutrition effects and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle is realizable within every member state in which malnutrition and obesity is an issue.

Something else that should also be deliberated on is whether fast food is considered to be such of a threat that it would need separate legislation: E.G. the imposition of taxes upon their consumption. Economic downfall as a result of this should however be taken into account and where needed combated. At all times, willingness to cooperate with these companies should be present.

Organic ways of producing food should be researched to the point that it is affordable for all. The use of farmland in countries that produce large quantities of food should be rethought, bearing the general health of people in mind, as opposed to pure revenue. This could be realized by means such as providing incentives to farmers wishing to initiate in such 'reformed farming'.

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Appendix or Appendices

- I. http://www.fastfoodmarketing.org/media/FastFoodFACTS_Report_Summary.pdf
- II. <http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/reports/RuddReportBellagioConference.pdf>

