Provisional agenda item 14: Progress report on the European Food and Nutrition Action Plan 2015-2020


Obesity is a complex multifactorial disease that independently increases mortality rates and is a major risk factor for the three NCDs responsible for the majority of premature deaths worldwide - cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer. This definition was also officially recognised by the EC in March 2021, marking a key milestone to address the obesity epidemic in Europe. However, progress has been slow and gaps that urgently need to be addressed remain.

WOF’s Global Atlas on Childhood Obesity predicts that over 18 million European children will be living with obesity by 2025. No country in the region is on track to meet WHO obesity targets, a risk that will likely be exacerbated by the consequences of COVID-19. In the current economic climate, the rising costs of obesity and obesity-related disease are an imperative to act: it is estimated that the cost of high BMI to health services in Europe is US$ 218 billion per year, over 11% of all healthcare expenditure. While some progress has been made to create healthy food and drink environments, gaps remain. Unhealthy diets - a key social determinant of health that influence all the major risk factors for the rise in NCDs - are responsible for more deaths than any other globally. Many determinants of health lie outside the traditional jurisdiction of the health sector, and can only be improved through a multisectoral approach: nowhere is this more true than for obesity.

WOF’s latest report highlighted the correlation between COVID-19 deaths rates and obesity: death rates are ten times higher in countries where over 50% of the population is overweight. It is thus vital that we focus during this time on prioritising nutrition and obesity in national and sub-national strategies and support the development of policies to support and sustainable diets. We urge all Member States in the European region to:

- Adopt systems-based approaches between health and other sectors to address the upstream factors influencing obesity and related NCDs, including lack of access to healthy food, poorly designed built environments, access to health services and education.
- Implement comprehensive policies and actions to improve food environments and support healthy sustainable diets, for instance through marketing restrictions and taxes. These should be legally-binding and mandatory, rooted in strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks.
- Adopt legal mechanisms to strengthen efforts to implement the Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes across the European region as a double-duty action.
- Emphasise that prevention and health promotion are pathways to UHC, including but not limited to primary health care, and urge implementation of evidence-informed nutrition policies, in all settings, including breastfeeding promotion, food warning labels, marketing restrictions, sugar sweetened beverage taxes, & trans-fat elimination.
- To ensure NCD patients have continued access to routine obesity treatment and management services during COVID-19.
- Advocate for people-centred care and ensure that people living with NCDs are included in the development and evaluations of interventions, policies and guidelines.

We welcome the Progress Report which reflects leadership and political commitment to reduce the burden of unhealthy diets across the European region. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in our health and
food systems, further reinforcing the risk and impact of poor nutrition and nutrition-related NCDs. Access to healthy, safe, sustainable and nutritious food is a key determinant of health and should be a right, not a privilege.