Farm subsidies part of 'dysfunctional' food system, says UN expert

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Developed countries must overhaul "misguided" agricultural subsidies and change health effects into account and reverse "deeply dysfunctional" food systems, a UN urged.

Farm aid that makes unhealthy ingredients cheaper than others is one of the "systemic problems" generating poor nutrition worldwide, argues the UN Special Rapporteur on the right report presented to the UN Human Rights Council today (March 6).

"In OECD countries in particular, where farm subsidies remain at high levels, the current system is one in which taxpayers pay three times for a system that is a recipe for unhealthy li Olivier De Schutter - referring to subsidies, tax-deductable marketing and healthcar

Global food systems are "obesogenic" and at the same time unable to address under

miconutrient deficiency, argues De Schutter in the report, 'The right to an adequate agriculture-food-health nexus'.

The EU institutions, which often cite a growing world population when calling for more food production, agreed on a series of new labelling rules last year to try and prevent misleading nutrition claims.

Yet De Schutter has accused governments of often being "indifferent to what kind of calories are on offer, at what price, to whom they are accessible and how they are marketed".

"One in seven people globally are undernourished, and many more suffer from the of micronutrient deficiency, while 1.3 billion are overweight or obese," slammed the rapporteur.

As well as redirecting subsidies to support more locally-produced and nutritious foc should also tax unhealthy products, regulate those high in saturated fats, salt and s down on junk food advertising, urges his report.

Policies blamed

The "transformation" of agri-food systems since the 1960s has played a major role nutrition, with subsidies encouraging industry to sell heavily processed foods at the making fruits and vegetables available at lower prices, says De Schutter.
With production having risen dramatically due to technological advances, subsidies “biased” in favour of large grain and soybean or livestock producers without considering on public health and the environment, claims the report.

These policies have led to energy-dense diets rich in sugar, salt and saturated fats cheap maize and soybean inputs for the food processing and livestock industries - expansion of cheap processed foods, it argues.

"Heavy processing thrives in our global food system, and is a win-win for multinational companies. Processed items can be produced and distributed on a huge scale, the subsidised ingredients and their increased shelf life," says De Schutter.

The study cites a 610% increase in world oilseed output between 1961 and 2009, c 332% rise in fruit and vegetable production, and a one-third increase in average daily intake between 1962 and 2000.

Subsidised agriculture has also changed the relative prices of foods in a consumer' argues De Schutter, with healthy diets now more expensive than those rich in oils, in high-income countries.

"Any society where a healthy diet is more expensive than an unhealthy diet is a society that must mend its price system,” slams the report - adding that developing countries are “victims” due to a rise in imported foods, which reduces opportunities for local farmers.

A health “disaster” caused by urbanisation and the growth of supermarkets is also developing world, warns the UN expert, noting that deaths from non-communicable as diabetes now outstrip communicable diseases in every region except Africa.

Overhaul needed

Voluntary guidelines have failed, claims De Schutter, who calls for "strong political ' collaboration across agriculture, finance, health, education and trade sectors to res systems and promote more sustainable diets.

Diverse farming systems and the livelihoods of poor farmers must be supported, wl rights “framework” should be adopted to help identify both short-term and long-term advocates the report.

The Belgian academic also urges public procurement schemes for school-feeding ; and support for locally-produced and nutritious food, calling on governments to adc strategies based on the "right to adequate food”.

The EU distributed CAP direct payments worth a total of €39.3 billion in 2010 and € while US ‘farm income stabilization’ subsidies amount to around US$20bn (€15.2bn