Conventional wisdom goes like this: you don’t change people’s diets by telling them what to eat. After all, no one likes to be lectured on what’s good for them. But the reality is that we do tell people what to eat, every day, and we tell them the wrong things.

In 2010, U.S. food companies spent $8.5 billion marketing food, beverages and candy to the public; meanwhile the U.S. government’s primary healthy eating program was budgeted at $44 million. Food companies are telling people what to eat, and they are doing so much louder than any current attempts by public authorities.

Nutritional failures are political. When 850 million people go to bed hungry each night, we know that it is global food systems that are failing and must be immediately reformed. But what about the 1.3 billion people who are overweight or obese? They, too, are victims of political inertia.

When it comes to overeating, personal choices only tell part of the story. A closer look at our food system shows that policies are skewed in a way that makes junk food artificially cheap, abundantly available and highly tempting for the most impressionable people — children. We live in an “obesogenic” environment where it is too easy to choose the bad calories.

Heavy food processing is a win-win for multinational agri-food companies. Processing adds value and increases the shelf life of products, allowing them to be manufactured, distributed and sold on a huge scale. The cereals, vegetable oils, sweeteners and flavourings used in processing are often highly subsidized, making it financially beneficial for companies to replace healthier ingredients. Meanwhile junk food ads can target children — and the activity can even be deducted from taxable profits.

But this translates into a big lose-lose for people. Trans fats and other processing ingredients lead to ill health, and children become hooked on the junk foods targeted at them. Processed food is generally cheap and therefore more available to poorer population groups, with negative health impacts disproportionately affecting women.

Meanwhile, producers of fresh, local food are undercut and forced out of business by multinational food processors. The breakdown of local food systems has far-reaching consequences. Without a supply of affordable, nutritious produce, local food and cooking traditions are lost, and people have no choice but to eat badly, or to eat less.

We have sleepwalked into an obesity epidemic with alarming public health consequences. The West is now exporting diabetes and heart disease to developing countries, along with the processed foods which line the shelves of global supermarkets. It is a problem big enough to potentially derail China’s economic growth: economic losses from obesity could reach 8 per cent of the country’s GDP by 2025.

And yet we remain politically silent. We have largely deferred to food companies the responsibility for ensuring that a good nutritional balance emerges from the mass-produced products which increasingly dominate our diets. And we have left it to the medical industry to prescribe drastic remedies when our health is at risk: slimming pills, nutrition pills, zero-carb diets.

These solutions are failing, as shown by soaring obesity levels and still endemic rates of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiency — often within the same countries. They are failing because the food systems underpinning them send the wrong signals, and the odds remain stacked against the achievement of a healthy, balanced diet.

Urbanization, supermarketization and the global spread of modern lifestyles have shaken up traditional food habits — and must take part of the blame. But governments have failed to take a grip on this changing landscape. They have stood idle while food companies have re-engineered the look, feel and contents of our food; they have ignored the health impacts of the agricultural subsidies handed out by their own ministries.

It is time for political responsibility to be reclaimed over people’s diets. This means overhauling the policies that make junk food artificially cheap. It means cracking down on junk food advertising aimed at children. It means regulating what food companies are allowed to put into products and how they label them. And it means supporting local food systems and fresh produce.

Only then will we have public solutions to this growing public health disaster.

Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. This week he presented a report titled The right to an adequate diet: the agriculture-food-health nexus to the UN Human Rights Council. He will conduct an official mission to Canada May 5-15 to observe the right-to-food situation across the country.