U.N. Official Says Junk Food Just as Bad as Cigarettes

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U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier De Schutter warned that obesity is a bigger global health threat than tobacco use, lamenting that it isn’t taken as seriously as it should be.

A United Nations official called for greater regulation of unhealthy foods on Monday, saying junk food is just as bad for global health as tobacco.

Olivier De Schutter, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to food, said the world needs to come together to regulate diet. “Unhealthy diets are now a greater threat to global health than tobacco,” he said in a speech at the opening of the World Health Organization’s annual summit. “Just as the world came together to regulate the risks of tobacco, a bold framework convention on adequate diets must now be agreed.”

De Schutter voiced frustration that the world hasn’t taken obesity seriously enough. “It has been two years since my report on nutrition and the right to food, and ten years since the World Health Organization (WHO) launched its Global Strategy on Diet Physical Activity and Health,” he said. “Yet obesity continues to advance—and diabetes, heart disease and other health complications along with it. The warning signs are not being heard.”

The Special Rapporteur has previously agitated for greater governmental action on junk foods, including taxing unhealthy products, regulating fats and sugars, cracking down on advertising for junk food, and rethinking agricultural subsidies that make unhealthy food cheaper.

“Governments have been focusing on increasing calorie availability,” he said, “but they have often been indifferent to what kind of calories are on offer, at what price, to whom they are made available, and how they are marketed.”
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