U.N. food chief: Obesity, unhealthy diets a greater threat than tobacco

Reducing access to and availability of unhealthy foods must galvanize the international community as the fight against tobacco did, said the United Nations' leading expert on food and nutrition. (Spencer Platt / Getty Images)

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The United Nations' leading voice on hunger has declared that the international community must mobilize to combat obesity and unhealthy diets, not a lack of food, and called on U.N. members to rally around a "bold framework" of regulations limiting access to salty, sugary foods that are high in saturated fats and contribute to obesity.

Olivier De Schutter, special rapporteur to the U.N. on the right to food, said Monday that the global struggle against tobacco use offered a model for efforts to stem the rising tide of obesity and poor nutrition in countries both developed and developing.

De Schutter renewed his call for a raft of measures proposed in his 2012 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, including the imposition of taxes and other regulations on unhealthy foods, crackdowns on the marketing of junk foods, an overhaul of agricultural subsidies that drive down the costs and drive up availability of some unhealthy foods (including sweeteners), and increased support for local food production.
The U.N. food chief's comments came as Consumers International prepared to release a slate of recommendations, titled "Towards a Global Convention to Protect and Promote Healthy Diets," in Geneva on Wednesday. The consumer watchdog organization will champion the proposals jointly with the World Obesity Federation. They are expected to track closely with those sought by De Schutter in his 2012 report.

The U.N. food chief tweeted Monday that unhealthy diets were now "a greater threat to global health than tobacco."

Worldwide, tobacco use remains the leading preventable cause of death, currently claiming 5 million lives annually, a figure projected to rise to 8 million by 2030.

Tobacco use has begun to decline in the world's most affluent countries, though it is increasing in the developing world. Meanwhile, obesity rates, which have raced upward for three decades in much of the developed world, have begun to skyrocket in some of the world's most populous countries, including China and India.

"Governments have been focusing on increasing calorie availability, 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," De Schutter said in a statement Monday.

He underscored the role of breast milk in infant nutrition and praised recent moves toward the regulation of milk formula in Hong Kong, the Philippines and other countries.

"Governments should move forward with these measures, which are essential to ensure that people are protected from aggressive misinformation campaigns," De Schutter said.

He also cited his support for the World Health Organization's International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly recommendations. He denounced as "simply false" the suggestion that steps outlined in those recommendations could violate international trade agreements.