UN food expert: “Chance to crack down on bad diets must not be missed”

NEW YORK / GENEVA – “Our food systems create sick people: failure to act decisively on this issue kills almost 3 million adults each year, and it is one reason why public health expenditures increased by 50 per cent over the past ten years in OECD countries. Yet now, world leaders are about to miss a once-in-a-generation opportunity to crack down on the marketing practices and public policy gaps which contribute to unhealthy diets and consign people to debilitating diseases,” warned the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, on the eve of a high-level UN summit* (September 19-20) aimed at mapping out a global response to non-communicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and type II diabetes.

“It is only the second time in history that the UN General Assembly will discuss a health issue. Last time they made a lasting commitment to tackle AIDS. Now they must do the same for non-communicable diseases,” the UN food expert asserted.

De Schutter called for the adoption of a host of initiatives, such as taxing unhealthy products and regulating harmful food marketing practices. “Voluntary guidelines are not enough. World leaders must not bow to industry pressure,” the Special Rapporteur said.

“If we are serious about tackling the rise of cancer and heart disease, we need to make ambitious, binding commitments to tackle one of the root causes – the food that we eat. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) 2004 Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health must be translated into concrete action: it is unacceptable that when lives are at stake, we go no further than soft, promotional measures that ultimately rely on consumer choice, without addressing the supply side of the food chain.”

At least 2.8 million adults die each year as a result of being overweight or obese, according to the WHO. Some 44% of the diabetes burden, 23% of the ischaemic heart disease burden and 7%-41% of certain cancer burdens can be attributed to overweight and obesity.

These diseases are made more likely by unhealthy lifestyles, and particularly an unbalanced diet lacking in nutrients. “It is crucial for world leaders to counter food industry efforts to sell unbalanced processed products and ready-to-serve meals too rich in trans fats and saturated fats, salt and sugars. Food advertising is proven to have a strong impact on children, and must be strictly regulated in order to avoid the development of bad eating habits early in life.”

“A comprehensive strategy on combating bad diets should also address the farm policies which make some types of food more available than others,” De Schutter added. “Currently, agricultural policies encourage the production of grains, rich in carbohydrates but relatively poor in micronutrients, at the expense of the production of fruits and vegetables. We need to question how subsidies are targeted and improve access to markets for the most nutritious foods.”
De Schutter also pointed at the globalization of food supply chains, which he said mean "an increased supply of junk food: energy-rich, nutrient-poor food that is particularly attractive to poor consumers because it is cheap, and that is processed with trans fats that ensure a long shelf life. The public health consequences are dramatic, and they affect disproportionately those with the lowest incomes."

The UN food expert said: "I have recently visited emerging countries** where this nutrition transition is in full flow. It is particularly important for these countries to encourage healthy diets now, if we are to avoid millions more people succumbing to non-communicable diseases in the coming decades."

ENDS

(*) The UN General Assembly meeting on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases will be held on 19 and 20 September 2011 in New York and is tasked with producing agreement on a strategy document. For the latest draft, see: http://www.who.int/nmh/events/un_ncd_summit2011/political_declaration.pdf

(**) Emerging countries recently visited by the Special Rapporteur including Brazil, China, Mexico and South Africa confront the double burden of undernutrition and overnutrition. In Mexico, while about 18 per cent of the population lives in food poverty, 7 adults out of 10 are overweight or obese, and these people will experience sickness, on average, for 18.5 years during their lifetime. In China, the rate of overweight children is today similar to the rate of those who are underweight. In South Africa, where one in five families have inadequate access to food, 56 per cent of women are overweight or obese. See the individual country reports and statements at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/visits.htm and http://www.srfood.org.