Unhealthy diets greater threat to health than tobacco; UN expert calls for global regulation

GENEVA (19 May 2014) - The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, called today for a new global agreement to regulate unhealthy diets.

“Unhealthy diets are now a greater threat to global health than tobacco. Just as the world came together to regulate the risks of tobacco, a bold framework convention on adequate diets must now be agreed,” he said, speaking on the eve of the Geneva event organized on May 21 by Consumers International to launch their new recommendations: ‘Towards a Global Convention to Protect and Promote Healthy Diets.’

De Schutter recalled that, despite increasingly worrying signs and well-identified priority actions, the international community continues to pay insufficient attention to the worsening epidemic of obesity and unhealthy diets.

“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. Yet obesity continues to advance - and diabetes, heart disease and other health complications along with it. The warning signs are not being heard,” he said.

In his 2012 report* to the UN Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur identified five priority actions to address the issues of obesity and unhealthy diets:

1) Taxing unhealthy products;
2) Regulating foods high in saturated fats, salt and sugar;
3) Cracking down on junk food advertising;
4) Overhauling misguided agricultural subsidies that make certain ingredients cheaper than others; and
5) Supporting local food production so that consumers have access to healthy, fresh and nutritious foods.

“Attempts to promote healthy diets will only work if the food systems underpinning them are put right,” he added. “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,” said De Schutter.

The UN expert also drew attention to the role of breast-milk in infant nutrition, welcoming
the recent moves towards regulating the advertising 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,” he said. “They are also crucial to implement the WHO International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly recommendations. Suggestions that these steps could violate WTO law by restricting international trade are simply false,” he added.

ENDS


Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the UN Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization. Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx or www.srfood.org

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