



Why we need a Global Convention to protect and promote healthy diets

The world is facing a **nutrition crisis**, with malnutrition responsible for a large proportion of premature death and disease. Poor diets now underlie over 11 million deaths annually and are the leading risk factor for death. Cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) killed more than eight million people before their sixtieth birthdays in low and middle-income countries in 2013 alone. Furthermore, stunting and wasting continue to be a major cause of death and disability in many low- and middle-income countries, creating a double burden of malnutrition. All of these conditions are highly influenced by diet and could be addressed by a healthy food system.

The global economic impact from obesity is roughly \$2.0 trillion, or 2.8 percent of global GDP, roughly equivalent to the global impact from smoking or armed violence, war, and terrorism. Rates of prevalence are rising far faster in developing economies. Premature illness and disability from diet-related NCDs impoverish families, hurt productivity and bankrupt health systems. Something transformative needs to be done.

We are concerned that traditional and healthy food supplies are increasingly undermined by under-regulated markets which allow the excessive promotion of ultra-processed food products high in fat, sugar and salt and make them widely available, accessible and affordable. This undermines the market for more nutritious and local foods.

We assert that:

To **improve the global state of nutrition, protect their economic security and the stability of their health systems**, governments need to implement a package of multisectoral policies, as recommended by the UN General Assembly, which assure that their food supplies can protect and promote public health.

To **prevent obesity and non-communicable diseases** food marketing should favour foods recommended for increased consumption in national food-based dietary guidelines and be strictly limited for those foods for which decreased consumption is recommended.

To **prevent hunger and under-nutrition** foods recommended in national food based dietary guidelines need to meet minimum standards of nutritional quality, be equitably accessible, sustainable and affordable.

To **prevent food waste** and to increase sustainability, food supplies should aim to match population nutritional requirements, determined by national dietary guidelines.

To **strengthen food and nutrition security** governments need to ensure food markets and food marketing support healthy dietary patterns.

To **strengthen national food sovereignty** in light of the increasingly global nature of food trade, all governments, including those within regional economic areas, and in smaller nations, need the protection of a legally-binding Global Convention.

To **promote consumer rights** and to **protect public health** governments need to initiate robust government wide legislation which permits and requires public health action to promote food and nutrition security, and to define minimum nutritional standards and ensure that those standards help to drive commercial food markets and the operation of global food trade.

These initiatives, in keeping with robust health economic analyses of cost-effective prevention policies, should be taken by governments without influence from stakeholders with conflicts of interests

We are not alone...

UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights 2012-present, Farida Shaheed: “Food advertising and promotion have contributed to shifting dietary patterns towards those closely linked with non-communicable diseases. By promoting mainly manufactured products with a high content of fat, sugar or salt, food and beverage companies contribute to altering previous eating and cooking practices that often were healthier and more ecologically sound ... Safeguards need to be made more effective.” ([2014 report](#))

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food 2010-2014, Olivier de Schutter: “Just as the world came together to regulate the risks of tobacco, a bold framework convention on adequate diets must now be agreed ... Attempts to promote healthy diets will only work if the food systems underpinning them are put right. 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” ([2014 press release](#))

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health 2008-2014, Anand Grover: “The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control could be used as the foundation on which an international framework for accountability and monitoring of the food and beverage industry can be built.” ([2014 report](#))

“It is also open to the World Health Organization to use its mandate as a treaty-making body to negotiate a framework convention on unhealthy diets, recognizing the inextricable link between unhealthy foods and NCDs as it has done for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. A specific binding framework convention on unhealthy diets would be more effective in responding to the global NCD disease burden.” ([2014 statement](#))

An open letter to the heads of WHO and FAO ahead of the second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) stated that *“the governance of food production and distribution cannot be left to economic interests alone. To achieve the necessary dietary improvements and to secure good population health, a set of policy options for health diets are required. This includes governments taking regulatory approaches to the operation of the market”*. This [letter](#) was supported by more than 300 experts and civil society organisations around the world.

Time to act

We call on the member states of the WHO to:

- 1. Mandate the WHO to develop a framework convention for the protection and promotion of healthy diets, through a process protected from conflicts of interest;*
- 2. Implement national legislation which puts into practice and goes beyond the global commitments assumed in the Global Action Plan for NCDs to help consumers to make healthier choices and binds food suppliers to conform to standards based on national food-based dietary guidelines in their promotion and marketing of food products;*
- 3. Develop and enact Public Health legislation which allows and requires regulations for the protection and promotion of dietary health as a priority over the protection of commercial investments;*

Additionally, we urge member states to require the WHO to report on progress on these three actions at the next World Health Assembly.

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