



Take on food industry to beat malnutrition and obesity, says report

Experts call for influence of 'big food' to be curbed to also tackle issue of climate change

Sarah Boseley *Health editor*

Sun 27 Jan 2019 23.30 GMT

The influence of “big food” must be curbed around the world if obesity, malnutrition and climate change are to be effectively tackled, according to a report.

Overconsumption of junk food and not having enough to eat are two sides of the malnutrition coin, said a commission of experts brought together by the Lancet medical journal. A third major global problem is interlinked - climate change that is worsened by food production, waste and transportation.

The commission said political leaders and civil society must step up to counter the commercial interests and lobbying of the food industry. It called for a UN treaty along the lines of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control to support countries in drawing up sustainable and healthy food policies. As the FCTC does with the tobacco industry, the proposed treaty would ban food and drink companies from discussions.

The commission also recommended removing subsidies for agriculture and transport that contribute to poor diet and health. It proposed a \$1bn (£760m) fund for civil society

organisations that want to take on the food industry and press for sugar taxes and other measures to improve diets and counter obesity.

The experts cited the work of the Mexican NGO El Poder Del Consumidor, which successfully fought for taxes on soft drinks, funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

The food and drink industry has enormous power and the money to exert pressure on governments, said Tim Lobstein of the World Obesity Federation, one of the commissioners. In the US Congress, he pointed out, there are 294 lobbyists from food and drink companies, more than from either the tobacco or alcohol industries.

“Of that, two-thirds are former Congress staff, so they know what they are doing. That level of lobbying is devoted to preserving the status quo. It is a major barrier to change and must be challenged,” he said.

In the US and Australia, food industry pressure succeeded in keeping sustainability out of national dietary guidelines, the commission said. In the US, subsidies for fossil fuels keep petrol prices artificially low, encouraging car use rather than cycling, walking or taking public transport.

No country has succeeded in reversing its obesity epidemic, said the experts, who argued a broader attack is needed.

Prof Boyd Swinburn of the University of Auckland, the co-chair of the commission, said: “Until now, undernutrition and obesity have been seen as polar opposites of either too few or too many calories.

“In reality, they are both driven by the same unhealthy, inequitable food systems, underpinned by the same political economy that is single-focused on economic growth and ignores the negative health and equity outcomes.

“Climate change has the same story of profits and power ignoring the environmental damage caused by current food systems, transportation, urban design and land use.”

Echoing the “planetary health diet” devised by a commission convened by the Lancet and the Eat Forum NGO, the obesity commission said there could be extensive benefits to the planet if people ate less red meat.

As an example of the interconnection of obesity, malnutrition and climate change, the experts said reducing red meat consumption through taxes, redirected subsidies, health and environmental labelling, and social marketing would lead to healthier diets, prevention of cancer and obesity, more land for efficient, sustainable agriculture, opportunities to reduce undernutrition, and lower greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture.

Sustainable food production is rising, said Lobstein. Changing the practices of large food companies, however, will not happen quickly.

Making the industry pay for plastic pollution could be one way to bring about change. From a survey by Ocean Conservancy, he calculated that 70% of the 10 most common types of plastic waste in seas is from food and drink. Food wrappers, plastic bottles, bottle tops and grocery bags are in the top five items found, after cigarette butts.

“All these things are interrelated,” Lobstein said. “There are compounds in plastics that are endocrine disruptors, which may be contributing to obesity. If plastics in the food chain are

causing weight gain, we will need win-win solutions to improve the food supply while saving the planet.”

Fiona Sing of the World Cancer Research Fund said: “We support the implementation of a global treaty to limit the political influence of big food. How we produce and consume food is possibly the most important determinant of both human and environmental health worldwide.

“Obesity and undernutrition affect billions of people and are major drivers in diet-related non-communicable diseases, including cancer.”

As 2019 begins...

... we're asking readers to make a new year contribution in support of The Guardian's independent journalism. More people are reading and supporting our independent, investigative reporting than ever before. And unlike many news organisations, we have chosen an approach that allows us to keep our journalism accessible to all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford. But this is only possible thanks to voluntary support from our readers - something we have to maintain and build on for every year to come.

Readers' support powers The Guardian, giving our reporting impact and safeguarding our essential editorial independence. This means the responsibility of protecting independent journalism is shared, enabling us all to feel empowered to bring about real change in the world. Your support gives Guardian journalists the time, space and freedom to report with tenacity and rigor, to shed light where others won't. It emboldens us to challenge authority and question the status quo. And by keeping all of our journalism free and open to all, we can foster inclusivity, diversity, make space for debate, inspire conversation - so more people, across the world, have access to accurate information with integrity at its heart. Every contribution we receive from readers like you, big or small, enables us to keep working as we do.

The Guardian is editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias and not influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one edits our editor. No one steers our opinion. This is important as it enables us to give a voice to those less heard, challenge the powerful and hold them to account. It's what makes us different to so many others in the media, at a time when factual, honest reporting is critical.

Please make a new year contribution today to help us deliver the independent journalism the world needs for 2019 and beyond. **Support The Guardian from as little as €1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Obesity
- Health
- Food & drink industry
- Food
- news