

Overweight and Obesity and its linkages to food systems in LMICs

On June 22, 2023, IFAD's nutrition team, in partnership with Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation- (WCDI-WUR), organized the webinar "Overweight and Obesity and its linkages to food systems in LMICs" gathering speakers from academia, government and development agencies. The purpose of the webinar was to share the findings of a joint study between IFAD and WCDI on the topic, launch its three publications, and to exchange knowledge with respected speakers and panellists. The joint study with WCDI aimed to explore how IFAD can best contribute to food system transformations and mitigate the rising of overweight and obesity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in the regions of the world where IFAD has active projects investments.

Sanne Bakker, MSc moderated the webinar. Sanne Bakker was part of the team from WCDI who conducted the study, on overweight and obesity and its linkages with food systems in LMICs, in partnership with IFAD. She is a trainer, technical advisor, researcher and project manager with broad international experience in humanitarian and development projects contributing to food and nutrition security.

Juan Carlos Mendoza Casadiego, IFAD's Director for Environment, Climate, Gender, and Social Inclusion Division provided the opening remarks. Juan Carlos Mendoza Casadiego emphasized that nutrition lies at the centre of IFAD's strategic framework (2016, 2025) and that specific nutrition targets have been set for IFAD's projects. He also touched on the need to study overweight and obesity since the world continues to see a rise in obesity. He explained the rationale behind addressing overweight and obesity from a food systems perspective as the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition (Glopan) framework illustrates the link between diet quality and different components of the food system, including agricultural production, which has the potential to drive dietary choices and food prices. He introduced the study and the partnership with Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen University & Research (WCDI). He emphasized how IFAD appreciates this partnership and the work done between IFAD and Wageningen University for the last ten years in many development domains.

Professor Boyd Swinburn, a Professor of Population Nutrition and Global Health at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, provided a keynote presentation. He led two Lancet Series on Obesity in 2011 and 2015 and co-chaired the 2019 Lancet Commission on Obesity. In his presentation, he touched on the increased prevalence of overweight and obesity in low- and middle-income countries. He mentioned the Ultra-processed food products and drinks as essential drivers for the increased prevalence of overweight and obesity and how their increased sales in LMICs mimics the increased prevalence of overweight and obesity. He mentioned the socioeconomic factors, built environments and government context as mediators that can attenuate or extenuate drivers' effect on overweight and obesity prevalence. He emphasized that the greatest challenge of the 21st century is the Global Syndemic which he identified as the occurrence of obesity, undernutrition, and climate change pandemics; stressing that the three pandemics have the same drivers. He identified malnutrition in all its forms, including high BMI, as the number one risk factor for premature death and adjusted life years lost in all countries from low-income to high-income ones. He believes that governments have the tools to transform food systems, however, although there are publications on how to prevent obesity, for example, by WHO, government implementation has been patchy. He identified policy inertia as the inability or unwillingness to act on overweight and obesity as a problem caused by i) Industry opposition (highly profitable commercial entities) ii) governments reluctance to regulate and tax (caused by, e.g., lobbying) iii) the lack of demand for public policies. He believes that collective action from civil society to demand government action and public policies is the way forward to push for better food policies.

Dr. ir. Marion Herens presented the study done in partnership between IFAD and WCDI and its findings. Dr. Herens is a food and nutrition security expert and senior researcher at Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen University & Research. She started by presenting the study objectives, which were identifying: 1) the drivers and causes of overweight and obesity in rural LMICs, and 2) the existing interventions in LMICs. The HLPE food systems framework was used as a theoretical framework to collect data and present findings. The first learning product of the study was a literature review highlighting the available evidence on drivers and existing interventions. The second was the country mapping focused on case studies from five countries, Bolivia, Nigeria, Egypt, Indonesia, and Zambia, representing all the regions where IFAD has active projects. It aimed to compare the literature-based information with practice-based practices. The team from IFAD and WCDI reviewed country documents and IFAD projects' documents and compared this information with stakeholder consultations. The third learning product was a research paper summarising findings from the previous two learning products. Dr. Marion highlighted some of the study findings. She mentioned the lack of evidence focusing on rural LMICs. As for overweight and obesity drivers, she highlighted the lower need for physical activity due to technological developments and easy access to high-caloric food, which increased the prevalence of overweight and obesity in rural areas and shrunk the difference between rural and urban BMI. As for overweight and obesity interventions, she mentioned that they were part of non-communicable diseases and health policies and were generated because of governments' belief that it would help reduce non-communicable diseases. As for food and nutrition policies identified in the countries, they focused on reducing stunting, and although overweight and obesity were emerging themes, they did not translate into actionable policies on overweight and obesity. Likewise, agriculture and food security policies identified did not have a specific focus on overweight and obesity and focused more largely on promoting diet diversity and the right to food. The study found interventions focusing on the transport, trade, packaging, processing and sales aspect of the food system to address overweight and obesity. Examples of these interventions included encouraging regulations on salt, trans-fat, and sugar, sugar taxation, food fortification, reviewing food labels and updating food composition tables to include modern foods. Interventions that focused on changing the food environment took place mainly in schools as schools were a favourite environment to intervene. She stressed that what poses a problem is that even for the interventions that do exist, data on their effectiveness and their effects on overweight and obesity prevalence did not exist, which makes it hard to know what works and what does not and to compare the effectiveness of different intervention strategies. She gave an example; nutrition education and awareness were common intervention strategies; however, assessing the effectiveness of campaigns was not usually done. She recommended that multiple intervention strategies are needed to work together, as one intervention strategy alone is unlikely to work; what is needed is multi-level, multi-setting and multi-component strategies. She stressed the importance of collecting data to understand better what is driving the increase in overweight and obesity in rural areas specifically. According to the study, the food and nutrition agenda still focuses on undernutrition and micronutrient deficiency, not reflecting an actionable agenda on the triple burden of malnutrition (underweight, overweight and non-communicable diseases). She highlighted a need to identify the theories of change being used in existing overweight/obesity interventions in order to know what makes them work. She suggested that the following actions should i) strengthen partnerships between research and practice ii) embrace healthy diets as a pin to address both overnutrition and undernutrition and help make a bridge between both health and agriculture-driven strategies iii) explore new partnerships with SUN and GAIN, iv) engaging with the private sector and encouraging new policies on pricing, processing, marketing advertising practice v) coordinating partnerships among development actors, to raise awareness, support policy analysis and agenda setting, on the triple burden of malnutrition.

Following the two presentations, a panel discussion took place between three experts in the field.

David Coloza is a Nutrition Specialist with UNICEF in Jakarta, responsible for establishing the organisation's first-ever portfolio on overweight prevention and food systems in Indonesia. He highlighted that UNICEF Indonesia is trying to retrofit its programs to overweight obesity prevention. In terms of partnerships, they are looking to expand partnerships with, first, the Rome-based agencies, IFAD, WFP, and FAO to bring in the food systems perspective, which is different from the perspective UNICEF traditionally focuses on. Second, partnering with the Ministry of health because this is where many of the nutrition interventions fall. UNICEF is advocating to make social protection programs in Indonesia nutrition-sensitive, for example, improve the nutritional quality of the food assistance packages given to households in the country and assistance provided in emergencies as the food given to families in covid contained lots of sugar. Third, CSO groups. Fourth, formal and non-formal youth organizations raise awareness on overweight and obesity and related non-communicable diseases, especially since UNICEF's mandate focus on children, adolescents and youth. Fifth, the private sector, which he described as a challenge to partner with. Outside the beverage sector, they are trying to partner with SUN business partners and associations, for example, food retailers, which have a significant role in food systems and supply. He mentioned other efforts UNICEF Indonesia is doing to prevent overweight and obesity. For instance: i) they are helping the government strengthen regulations on the marketing of breastfeeding substitutes, ii) educating health workers and the public on the importance of breastfeeding not only to reduce wasting and stunting but also reducing the chances of becoming overweight in childhood and adulthood iii) they set up a public platform where the public can report violations in the country in supermarkets where breast milk substitutes are sold.

Dede Ekoue is IFAD Nigeria Country Director. She spoke on the role of organizations such as IFAD in overweight/obesity prevention. She highlighted the need to invest in obesity prevention because although IFAD's nutrition strategy encompasses both undernutrition and overnutrition, investments have focused more on the undernutrition part. She recommended that organizations like IFAD should: first systematically invest in obesity prevention. Second, continue to encourage the diversification of food production activities to include fruits and vegetables, like what IFAD Nigeria is currently doing, to make sure it does not only rely on starch food. She recommended these efforts be scaled up. Third, concerning influencing consumer behaviour, IFAD needs to continue to take advantage of its strong convening power to educate the public, considering its strong engagement with farmer and community organizations. Forth, IFAD can also focus on collecting data to influence policy and dialogue and strengthen the impact assessment of its interventions. Fifth, continue establishing partnerships and channelling them to lead overweight obesity efforts. IFAD is already working with the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, who is in charge of nutrition, and Ministry of humanitarian affairs at the government level, so coordination is essential. She recommended involving the private sector, which has the power to reverse obesity trends and promote good business practise and discourage practices that lead to more obesity. She highlighted that CSOs play a significant role in partnerships, and networks like GAIN and SUN are essential for IFAD. She highlighted that IFAD Nigeria is already working with UNICEF in Nigeria on a school feeding program. As for her priority action for acting on overweight/obesity, it was to integrate obesity more systematically in IFAD's investment design and create partnerships with the private sector and governments.

Professor Dr. Gihan Fouad Ahmad the Head of the National Nutrition Institute in Egypt addressed the role of nutrition-sensitive agriculture in acting on overweight and obesity. She mentioned that 70% of women are overweight or obese in Egypt. Thus, nutrition-sensitive agriculture has a role in targeting them. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture can empower women and increase their income which would help make their diets healthy; otherwise, they would be restricted to eating some of the heavily processed cheap food that is heavily available in markets around them. Another way to support women through agriculture is to help them establish home gardens which would help

increase their intake of fruits and vegetables that are very costly in Egypt. She mentioned that supporting women would benefit the whole family because they help make the family's diet healthier. She pointed out that the government's ration card program in Egypt, which provides food to 60% of citizens, might be a driver of overweight and obesity in Egypt as it provides unbalanced food that is high in calories and mainly consists of carbohydrates. Some of the initiatives made by the National Nutrition Institute in overweight obesity prevention were i) helping the government reformate the school feeding program, to make healthy food appealing for children and to ensure it provides balanced meals that meet the children's needs, ii) updating the food composition table iii) conducting many research studies on the topic, iv) launching the Educational Kitchens Initiative to educate mothers on how to provide healthy diets for their children, and how to cook traditional food in a healthy way, v) working with the governments to make healthy meals available at school canteens.

Joyce Njoro, who works at IFAD as the Lead Technical Specialist – Nutrition and Social Inclusion, provided the final remarks of the webinar. She mentioned that IFAD is interested in identifying entry points for action on overweight and obesity and understanding the role of agriculture in addressing overweight and obesity. She encouraged thinking of overweight and obesity beyond being an individual's health problem but also a part of a syndemic. She highlighted the need-to-know what opportunities within the food systems exist to address the problem and the need for engagement and coordination between different actors (ministries, private sector, NGOs, civil society) to work together to address the problem. She highlighted the lack of evidence of overweight and obesity interventions effectiveness, and she identified it as an area that IFAD should be investing in more as it is difficult to change policy or influence it without evidence. She stressed that prevention efforts are needed now to address overweight and obesity in LMICs because the problem will escalate and become more extensive if we do not act immediately. She finished by launching the study's three products: the literature review, which presents evidence on drivers of overweight and obesity from a food systems perspective; the country mapping, providing case studies from five countries; and a research paper that combines the latter two with a summarised version.