



UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

Standing Committee on Nutrition

Statement by the Working Groups on
Nutrition throughout the Life Cycle
and
Nutrition, Ethics and Human Rights
of the

United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN)

**The human right of children and adolescents
to adequate food and to be free from obesity and related diseases:
the responsibilities of food and beverage corporations
and related media and marketing industries**

Adopted in Geneva, 15 March 2006
and

Reiterated at the 34th Session of the SCN, Rome, 26 February to 1 March 2007

Child obesity has long been a problem in many high-income countries and is becoming a major health problem in many other countries throughout the world, including in developing countries, notably in Latin America and certain parts of South-East Asia and the Pacific. The causes are several and include inadequate breastfeeding, changing dietary consumption towards high energy, low nutrient-dense food items including fat-rich snacks and drinks containing high levels of sugar or salt. Lowered physical activity levels contribute to the picture and thus the causes are certainly multi-factorial. There are adverse health consequences for children, including the emergence of type 2 diabetes, but childhood and adolescent obesity also predisposes for long term health consequences in adulthood, increasing the risks for chronic diseases and reduced life expectancy.

There can be no doubt about the role played by the corporate sector and its active marketing of the kind of products that contribute to generating this change towards unhealthy consumption patterns affecting all age groups. Among these groups it is common knowledge that young mothers – often those pregnant for the first time and later their children – are particularly susceptible to marketing strategies that appeal to certain 'modern' lifestyles and group identity. An important example of how such marketing should and can be regulated is the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly Resolutions, which have been successfully incorporated into national laws in dozens of countries since the Code was passed at the 1981 WHA.

The aggressive marketing practices of much of the corporate sector, particularly those aimed at programs for school children, as well as an increasingly narrowly controlled retail market chain, are working directly against young people's right to adequate food¹ for nutritional health and wellbeing. It is important that such corporate actors recognise their joint responsibility, together with governments and other non-state actors, for the realisation of the right to adequate food and the highest attainable health² of all individuals and particularly of the young. Corporate practices should not contribute to establishing unhealthy food habits, thereby increasing the risk of developing disabling diseases and reduced quality of life.

A dialogue with the corporate food sector and related media and marketing industries should be initiated with a view to progressively shifting the demand away from, and eliminating the promotion of food and beverage products that contribute to diets that lead to childhood and adolescent ill-health and prospects for early death and/or disabling life years in adulthood, as recommended in the WHO/UNICEF Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding³ and the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health⁴. It is known that some corporations have already begun to alter their products to make them less harmful. This is welcome and must proceed systematically and on an accelerating scale. The current activities within the United Nations system, to encourage responsible corporate practices in regard to human rights, provide an important facilitating context.

Therefore, the Working Group on Nutrition, Ethics and Human Rights and the Working Group on Nutrition Throughout the Life Cycle of the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition request

- 1. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Business and Human Rights to give in-depth consideration to these issues in their forthcoming reports in order to increase the awareness of the problems faced.*
- 2. The UN agencies concerned, in particular WHO, UNICEF and FAO to develop a code of conduct concerning marketing to children and adolescents.*
- 3. Governments to urgently move towards appropriate regulation in this area.*

¹ The right to 'adequate' food is the formulation used in the relevant provision under international human rights law, notably Article 11.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966. The meaning of 'adequacy' in regard to food has later been interpreted in General Comment No.12 on the right to food issued by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1999, see: <http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/3d02758c707031d58025677f003b73b9?Opendocument> and subsequently used in *Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security* adopted by the FAO Council in November 2004, see <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/009/y9825e/y9825e00.htm>

² The right to 'the highest attainable health' is the formulation used in Article 12 of the same Covenant and later interpreted in General Comment No. 14 on the right to health issued by the Committee on ESCR in 2000, see: [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(symbol\)/E.C.12.2000.4.En?OpenDocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(symbol)/E.C.12.2000.4.En?OpenDocument)

³ World Health Organization, Geneva, 2003

⁴ World Health Organization, Geneva, 2004