

Obesity: Health and Economic Consequences of an Impending Global Challenge

Key Messages

Link to report:

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32383>

Obesity has long been perceived as a problem of high-income countries only. This is simply not true.

- In 2016 over 2 billion people globally were overweight or obese, and more than 70 percent of them live in low- or middle-income countries.
- Today, overweight/obesity-related diseases, such as diabetes and cancer, are among the top-three killers across the globe except in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Factors escalating the obesity epidemic include: ultra-processed and sugary foods are more readily available; levels of activity have declined while technology is replacing physical labor; and increase in wealth and income has led to increased consumption of unhealthy foods.

Obesity has a major impact on national economies and on human capital by reducing productivity and life expectancy and increasing disability and health care costs.

- It is projected that in the next 15 years, the costs of obesity will total more than US\$7 trillion in developing countries
- For example, in China between 2000 and 2009, health care costs associated with obesity grew from half a percent to more than 3 percent of China's annual health care expenditure.
- In Brazil, obesity-related health care costs are expected to double, from less than 6 billion in 2010 to more than US\$10 billion in 2050.
- Many countries across the globe are now suffering from what is referred to as the "double-burden of malnutrition"—high stunting and increasing obesity rates, further compromising their human capital.

To avoid the rise of obesity in future generations, governments and development partners must adopt a comprehensive approach, which includes a strong focus on preventative measures and better primary care.

- Primary health care provides an important entry point for individuals into the health system and can improve a country's ability to prevent obesity and thereby manage the burden of chronic diseases.
- Proactively addressing this issue helps building human capital, ensuring higher economic growth, and sustaining a workforce that is healthy and prepared for a productive future.
- Promising interventions to tackle obesity include: mandate the labeling of processed foods; increase consumer education; support strong fiscal policies, such as taxation of unhealthy foods; invest in early childhood nutrition programs; and enhance urban design and transport, such as playgrounds in schools and walking and bicycle paths and increase access to healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables.