

Technology

'Radical rethink' needed to tackle obesity, hunger, climate: Report

Govt asked to curb political influence of major corporations

PARIS: To defeat the intertwined pandemics of obesity, hunger and climate change, governments must curb the political influence of major corporations, said a major report yesterday calling for a 'global treaty' similar to one for tobacco control. But this will not happen unless ordinary citizens demand a "radical rethink" of the relationship between policymakers and business, nearly four dozen experts from The Lancet Commission on Obesity concluded.

"Powerful opposition from vested interests, lack of political leadership, and insufficient societal demand for change are preventing action," they said in a statement.

Nearly a billion people are hungry and another two billion are eating too much of the wrong foods, causing epidemics of obesity, heart disease and diabetes. Unhealthy diets account for up to 11 million premature deaths every year, according to the most recent Global Burden of Disease report.

"Malnutrition in all its forms—including undernutrition and obesity—is by far the biggest cause of ill-health and premature death globally," said Commission co-chair Boyd Swinburn, a professor at the University of Auckland. "Both undernutrition and obesity are expected to be made significantly worse by climate change." The way in which food is currently produced, distributed and consumed not only fuels the hunger and obesity pandemics, it also generates 25 to 30 percent of planet-warming greenhouse gas emis-

sions. Cattle production alone accounts for more than half of those gases, in the form of methane-laden flatulence and CO2 when forests—especially in Brazil—are cleared to make room for livestock. A transport system dominated by cars contributes another 15 to 25 percent of emissions, and supports a sedentary lifestyle.

Triple pandemic

"Underpinning all of these are weak political governance, the unchallenging economic pursuit of GDP growth, and the powerful commercial engineering of overconsumption," the report said. "Undernutrition is declining too slowly to meet global targets, no country has reversed its obesity epidemic, and comprehensive policy responses to the threat of climate change have barely begun."

Despite 30 years of warnings from science about the dire impacts of global warming, CO2 emissions hit record levels in 2017 and again last year. Because all these problems are interwoven, the answers must be too, the researchers emphasized. "Joining three pandemics—hunger, obesity, climate—together as 'The Global Syndemic' allows us to consider common drivers and shared solutions."

Another Lancet Commission report published last week calling for a dramatic shift in global diet to improve health and avoid "catastrophic" damage to the planet.

"Until now, undernutrition and obesity have been seen as polar opposites of either

too few or too many calories," said Swinburn. "In reality, they are both driven by the same unhealthy, inequitable food systems, underpinned by the same political economy."

The report calls for a Framework Convention on Food Systems—similar to global conventions for tobacco control and climate change—to restrict the influence of the food industry.

How we eat, live, move

The experts argue that economic incentives must be overhauled. Some five trillion dollars (4.4 trillion euros) in government subsidies for fossil fuels and large-scale agribusiness should be rechanneled toward "sustainable, healthy and environmentally friendly activities," they said.

To sharply reduce red meat consumption, for example, the report favors high taxes, abolishing subsidies, along with transparent health and environment labelling. In addition, they favor the creation of a one billion dollar philanthropic fund to support grassroots action. "Support from civil society is crucial to break the policy deadlock," said co-author William Dietz, a professor at George Washington University.

"As with other social movements—such as campaigns to introduce sugary drink taxes—efforts ... are more likely to begin at the community, city or state level." Nearly all facets of daily life are at play. "Tackling 'The Global Syndemic' requires an urgent rethink of how



we eat, live, consume and move," said Richard Horton, editor-in-chief of The Lancet.

The two Lancet reports are not the only urgent appeal from science in recent months. In October, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change likewise called for an economic and social "paradigm shift" to avoid global chaos.

Health advocates and climate experts hailed The Lancet commission's sweeping call for deep change. "For too long we have been day-dreaming our way to a diseased future," said Katie Dain, CEO of the

Noncommunicable Disease Alliance. "A food system that secures a better diet for this and the immediate next generations will save millions of lives and, at the same time, help save the planet." Industry representatives and libertarians slammed the findings as overwrought and an assault on free choice. "Nanny-state zealots are no longer hiding their intention to use the anti-tobacco blueprint to control other areas of our lives," said Christopher Snowden, head of lifestyle economics at the London-based Institute of Economic Affairs. — AFP

Electricity-hungry Cameroon boosts solar energy

MFOU, Cameroon: Adrienne Ngonou's 25-seat restaurant used to open from 8 am to 5 pm, shutting its doors as the sun began to go down. But these days it's open until 11 pm - and her profits have tripled.

"We now sell both during the day and late in the night because of the constant electricity supply," she said. "Two years ago, this was not possible." Ngonou's new power source is a government-provided solar array that supplies power to about 300 homes, businesses and other institutions in Mfou, a town of about 10,000 people east of Yaounde, Cameroon's capital. Earlier the area relied in part on grid power, which has been unreliable as

more erratic rainfall and droughts linked to climate change hit the county's hydropower dams, which supply the majority of its energy.

But the \$13,000 battery-backed solar grid, installed in 2017, has given the area it serves 24-hour reliable power - and is now being replicated in other power-hungry parts of Cameroon, as the government tries to plug a stubborn energy gap and shore up its energy system against climate change, officials say. Mfou's solar system was part of a deal between Cameroon's government and China's Huawei telecommunications company, which also installs solar installations, to supply solar energy to more than 160 villages, largely in rural areas, they say.

Solar's small share

So far solar power - much of it small-scale and often installed by non-governmental organizations - provides only about 1 percent of Cameroon's energy needs, according to 2017 government figures.

Energy expansion plans for Cameroon have focused

largely on fossil fuel plants and hydropower expansion, mostly funded by China. But now Cameroon's President Paul Biya "has thrown his hefty political weight in support of renewable energy and this has brought a new stimulating perspective," Martine Akame Mesumbe, director of gas exploitation at the Ministry of Water and Energy, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The government hopes to boost Cameroon's electricity access in rural areas as part of its "Vision 2035" development plan, aimed at expanding the economy and slashing poverty to 10 percent. So far that expansion has been hampered by a lack of power, experts say. According to a 2018 World Bank report, just half of Cameroon's people have access to electricity, with 80 percent of the supply concentrated in urban areas.

Rural electrification is just 17 percent, it said. As part of its push to change that, the government now aims to reach 1,000 communities - about 250,000 people in total - with solar power by the end of 2020, according to Mesumbe. Altogether it hopes to get electricity, from a

variety of sources, to 40 percent of rural Cameroonians by 2020. "This could drive significant economic change in rural Cameroon," Mesumbe said. More than \$120 million in funding for the push is coming from a Bank of China loan for renewable energy projects, he said.

Communities now hooked up to solar panels - like those in Mfou - say they are happy to have a cleaner and less costly source of energy. "It is a cheaper alternative to diesel generators and wood energy ... used in the past to power small businesses," said Roger Belinga, the mayor of Mfou. Jarome Angwi, a beer vendor in the town, said solar energy to power his refrigerator and premises costs just a fifth of what he used to pay for diesel.

Local officials say they hope access to electricity will help keep young people from deserting rural areas for jobs in Cameroon's cities. In Mfou, "even some of those who left are already coming back" since the solar panels were installed, Belinga said. Whether the new solar systems will be maintained, however, remains a question. — Reuters

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PAGE

248 33 199

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