



**Address by**  
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**to the**  
**OPEN FORUM ON ADDRESSING UNOPPOSED MARKETING OF**  
**UNHEALTHY FOODS AND BEVERAGES TO CHILDREN**  
**Amman, Jordan, 13–14 September 2015**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this unique forum which brings together representatives from different backgrounds. We have with us people from the media, artists, youth groups, social media and NGOs.

The forum is taking place as part of WHO's initiative to fight the epidemic of disease that is being driven by the marketing of unhealthy products, such as fast foods and beverages. Our focus today is on unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages.

The marketing of foods and beverages high in fat, sugar and salt is causing an unprecedented upsurge in childhood obesity. It is clear to me that if the marketing of unhealthy food to children continues to be unopposed, it will have a devastating impact on the health of children and the next generation in this Region. It was for this reason that I called for this initiative to be launched last year during our annual session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, which is attended by the ministers of health of the Region.

Already in our region, noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, cancer, and heart and chronic lung disease are among the top killers, responsible in some countries for more than 75% of deaths and more than 60% of the disease burden. People are dying too young and in a period of life when they are at their most productive. The amount of human suffering caused by these diseases is enormous, and the impact on socioeconomic development is devastating.

A key contributor to chronic diseases is unhealthy weight. The prevalence of overweight and obesity in our region is alarming, among both adults and children. It starts from early childhood. For instance, in this region, the prevalence of overweight is 46.8% higher than the global average of 39% and obesity is 19% higher than the global average of 12.9%.

An obese child has a 60% chance of becoming an obese adult. Many countries of the Region suffer already from a high level of adult obesity. For the first time in history, the life expectancy of the next generation is projected to be shorter than that of their parents. And this does not take into account the years of disability that accompany chronic diseases. Apart from heart disease and diabetes, overweight and obesity also increase the risk of cancer of the breast, colon/rectum, endometrium, kidney and pancreas, and mortality rates increase with increasing degrees of overweight.

Childhood obesity is caused by unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles. A major factor in recent years has been the rapid increase in the consumption of unhealthy fast foods that are high in fat and salt, and of sugary sodas. This is being driven by the ubiquitous advertising and marketing of these products – which is what brings us together for two days. You can see it all around you. There is an immense amount of such marketing, and it is growing in power and reach with the digital revolution. We know from extensive scientific research that this marketing encourages the consumption of fast foods and sodas, and this leads to chronic disease, disability and premature death.

In our region action to tackle this issue has been slow, despite clear recommendations from WHO and the United Nations as a whole. In 2014, ministers of health of Member States of the Region raised concerns about their inability to control the marketing of unhealthy products targeted at the general public, and particularly at children – especially fast foods and sodas. Globally, the companies which produce and market these products have marketing skills and techniques that are too powerful to control.

Let me emphasize that we are not talking about banning the marketing of every food product. We are talking about the kind of marketing that promotes unhealthy food and that specifically targets children in places where they live, play and study, because this will result in a generation suffering from an epidemic of chronic diseases that is worse than the epidemic we already see today.

Addressing this kind of marketing can only be achieved through social change and massive social mobilization, including the involvement of media, artists, and responsible youth groups. Media plays a key role in restricting advertising and in educating the general public through the main media channels.

Artists are role models for youth, and youth groups play a great role in education. All of you have immense influence on the public, and on young minds and social trends.

We know that there is a great deal of food advertising, in multiple channels, targeting children; that children are the most vulnerable and exposed population group; and that the food industry is innovative in its use of means that are becoming ever more creative, subtle and powerful. As the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states, ‘in all actions concerning children, ...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’. We all have an obligation to observe this principle.

During these two days, we will be discussing, together, creative ways to take action against this aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods and sodas to our children. We will seek to determine what can be done about this problem. We have asked you because we know you have the ideas, creativity and energy that are now needed. You have the experience, the networks and the understanding of young people to help us fight this threat. We need to mobilize citizens, engage young people and begin a process of profound social change – and we know you can help us to do this.

I am confident that with your experience and influence, you can help us create an environment for children that is free of commercial risks to health.

Again, I thank you for accepting our invitation and I wish you a productive discussion and a pleasant stay in Jordan.