



Obesity “time bomb” ticks away in developing economies

Developing countries need to urgently deal with an obesity “time bomb” ticking away in their economies, and which is already dragging down growth and driving up health costs.

The World Health Organization says that in 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults were overweight and 650 million were obese, with the worldwide prevalence of obesity nearly tripling since 1975.

A new book by the Asian Development Bank Institute, *Overweight and Obesity in Asia and the Pacific: Trends, Costs, and Policies for Better Health*, gathers analyses by economists, doctors, and public health experts. It was edited by Matthias Helble, a senior economist and co-chair of the Research Department at ADBI in Tokyo, and Azusa Sato, a health specialist at the Asian Development Bank in Manila. It explains that 62% of the world’s overweight people live in developing countries and that about 1 billion people are overweight or obese in Asia and the Pacific, the most in any region in the world.

Helble says time is running out for authorities to act.

Two of five adults in Asia and the Pacific are overweight or obese. The health costs of these conditions undermine economic growth and lower the chances that the region will achieve the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals for health. Our book compiles the work of a wide array of experts who examine the trends and prevalence and economic costs of obesity and overweight, and recommend ways to solve the problem.

Helble says economic success in Asia and the Pacific over the past 3 decades has mostly translated into better health, including life expectancy that is among the highest in the world.

But as they become more prosperous, many drink and smoke too much, don't exercise enough, and eat poorly.

It's not just individuals who are harmed. Economies pay a high price for increased health care and lost productivity.

The direct costs, mainly associated with higher healthcare expenditures, amount to 8.9% of health expenditure in Asia and the Pacific. Indirect costs, mainly due to disability and premature mortality, are nearly 3.5% of healthcare expenditures.

The costs associated with overweight and obesity are about 0.8% of gross domestic product, or about \$166 billion—an amount that could severely undermine economic development.

In general, Asians have a higher percentage of body fat and higher disease risk than Europeans; Pacific populations appear to have more lean mass than Europeans, but a higher risk of diseases like diabetes.

In Central Asia, almost 50% of the population was considered overweight and obese in 2013.

In five countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Turkmenistan—more than 50% of the population was overweight and obese in 2013. Azerbaijan had the largest increase in Central Asia, from 49% in 1990 to 63% in 2013.

The prevalence of overweight and obesity in East Asia appears low, except for Mongolia, which reached almost 50% in 2013. Still, the rate of overweight and obesity more than doubled in the People's Republic of China from 13% in 1990 to 28% in 2013. Overweight and obesity rates rose rapidly in the Republic of Korea and Taipei, China, as well.

In Bangladesh, only 8% of its people were overweight and obese in 1990, but by 2013, 17% were—the largest percentage increase in South Asia by far. The percentage of overweight and obese people in Nepal and Sri Lanka has also increased rapidly. More than 30% of people in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, and Pakistan were overweight and obese in 2013.

Helble says the change was most dramatic in Southeast Asia, where the number of overweight and obese people increased by almost 40% from 1990 to 2013.

Around 15% of Indonesia's population was overweight and obese in 1990, but that number shot up to 26% in 2013. Thailand has seen a similar trend: from 21% in 1990 to 40% today. Overweight and obesity has also increased rapidly in Cambodia and the Philippines. And although Viet Nam has one of the lowest rates of overweight and obesity in the region, the jump from 6% in 1990 to 13% in 2013 means that it had the biggest percentage increase in Southeast Asia.

61% of people in the Pacific were overweight and obese in 2013—higher than in Asia. The worst were Tonga at 86% and Samoa at 84%, although overweight and obesity have been increasing at a more moderate rate.

Although the problem of excess body weight has received tremendous public attention in recent years, no country has been able to curb increasing overweight and obesity.

Overweight and obesity can be tackled from at least two policy angles: improving nutrition and increasing physical activity. These are closely associated with culture, the environment, and socioeconomic factors, which make manipulating these angles difficult. Policymakers have chosen to influence food choices through market mechanisms such as price changes as well as government interventions such as regulations against unhealthy foods, and to target behaviors as early as possible, at childhood and in school.

Intervention costs vary substantially, as do their results. Requiring producers to label food could be expensive and confuse consumers. But restricting marketing to children doesn't cost much and could be highly effective.

While many countries in the region have already started to discuss or implement policies, more and faster action is needed to tackle this multisectoral problem. We hope that presenting evidence on the problems and consequences of obesity will contribute to the current debate and to better policy design.

That was Mathias Helble, former senior economist and co-chair of the Asian Development Bank Institute's Research Department in Tokyo. He and Azusa Sato, a health specialist at the Asian Development Bank in Manila, edited ADBI's new book, [*Overweight and Obesity in Asia and the Pacific: Trends, Costs, and Policies for Better Health*](#). Future episodes will explore the findings of the landmark ADBI report.

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