



## In richer economies, the poor are more at risk of becoming obese than the more affluent

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Economic development can have significant health costs for growing numbers of overweight and obese people, as the example of Indonesia illustrates. This is what a new book by the Asian Development Bank Institute concludes. *Overweight and Obesity in Asia and the Pacific: Trends, Costs, and Policies for Better Health* gathers analyses by economists, doctors, and public health experts, including Matthias Helble, ADBI's co-chair of research at the time the book was published and now an economist at the Asian Development Bank headquarters in Manila, and Toshiaki Aizawa, a PhD student at the University of York in the United Kingdom. They write that the growing numbers of overweight and obese people are one of the most pressing public health issues, particularly in developing countries, where almost two-thirds of the world's obese people live.

Obesity is expected to continue increasing, even while it has slowed in developed countries. Helble explains:

**Numerous factors contribute to overweight and obesity. As an economy develops, people typically shift from agriculture to manufacturing and eventually to services, so work becomes more sedentary. People spend more of their income on food—frequently more energy-dense, high-fat food. Urbanization has also accelerated lifestyle changes and worsened resulting health conditions. Meanwhile, those remaining in poverty find it hard to buy adequate food.**

Overweight and obesity are spreading worldwide but their distribution across income groups varies by country.

As a country moves from low- and middle-income to high-income status, the relationship between socioeconomic status and obesity is reversed: in richer economies, the less wealthy are more at risk of becoming obese than the more affluent.

Indonesia has experienced fast economic growth in recent years and has the largest population in Southeast Asia, making it one of the best-case studies among the emerging economies of Southeast Asia, Helble says.

The proportion of overweight and obese people is growing rapidly, especially among the less wealthy. Although overweight and obesity are still more prevalent among the wealthy, the less wealthy are becoming overweight or obese more quickly.

Over the past 2 decades, lower-income groups have increased body weight faster than higher-income groups. The rapid growth of overweight and obesity among lower-income people is worrisome. The overweight risk developing chronic diseases, which are expensive to treat. And those least prepared for noncommunicable diseases run the highest risk of developing them.

Policy makers in Indonesia need to think about how to slow down increasingly prevalent obesity, especially among the poor. One option is education. Another might be taxing unhealthy foods such as soft drinks. Given the sharp increase in overweight and obesity in Southeast Asia, more research is needed to better understand the problem and to be able to design responses that consider large socioeconomic gaps.

That was Matthias Helble, senior economist and co-chair of the Research Department at the Asian Development Bank Institute, in Tokyo and now an economist at the Asian Development Bank headquarters in Manila. He wrote a case study on Indonesia with Toshiaki Aizawa, a PhD student at the University of York, United Kingdom. The chapter, “Socioeconomic Inequality in Excessive Weight,” is in a new ADBI book, *Overweight and Obesity in Asia and the Pacific: Trends, Costs, and Policies for Better Health*, edited by Helble and Azusa Sato, a health specialist at the Asian Development Bank, in Manila, the Philippines.

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