

# Obesity and our national health and economic crises

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As [UNICEF](#) (the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) reported yesterday that:

*Obesity surpassed underweight as the more prevalent form of malnutrition this year, affecting 1 in 10 – or 188 million – school-aged children and adolescents, and placing them at risk of life-threatening disease, UNICEF warned in a new report today.*

Feeding Profit: How Food Environments are Failing Children draws on data from over 190 countries and finds the prevalence of underweight among children aged 5-19 has declined since 2000, from nearly 13 per cent to 9.2 per cent, while obesity rates have increased from 3 per cent to 9.4 per cent. Obesity now exceeds underweight in all regions of the world, except sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

That ultra-processed foods are to blame for this crisis is clear from case studies:

*According to the findings, several Pacific Island countries have the highest prevalence of obesity globally, including 38 per cent of 5 to 19-year-olds in Niue, 37 per cent in Cook Islands, and 33 per cent in Nauru. These levels – which have all doubled since 2000 – are largely driven by a shift from traditional diets to cheap, energy-dense, imported foods.*

*Meanwhile, many high-income countries continue to have high levels of obesity, for example 27 per cent of 5 to 19-year-olds in Chile are living with obesity, 21 per cent in the United States, and 21 per cent in the United Arab Emirates.*

They added:

*According to the latest available data, 1 in 5 children and adolescents aged 5-19 globally – or 391 million – are overweight, with a large proportion of them now classified as living with obesity.*

*Children are considered overweight when they are significantly heavier than what is healthy for their age, sex and height. Obesity is a severe form of overweight and leads*

*to a higher risk of developing insulin resistance and high blood pressure, as well as life-threatening diseases later in life, including type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers.*

*The report warns that ultra-processed and fast foods – high in sugar, refined starch, salt, unhealthy fats and additives – are shaping children's diets through unhealthy food environments, rather than personal choice. These products dominate shops and schools, while digital marketing gives the food and beverage industry powerful access to young audiences.*

I have talked about this issue of obesity and its direct relationship with ultra-processed foods many times before on this blog. Nothing changes my mind about the fact that this is one of the most significant issues that we face. If diets high in ultra-processed foods were addressed, and that consumption was reduced, not only would much of childhood obesity be tackled, but so too would much of the incidence of the following diseases, all of which are fuelled mainly by the excessive sugars in these processed food products:

- \* Adult obesity
- \* Type 2 diabetes
- \* Most forms of heart disease
- \* Many types of cancer
- \* Depression and anxiety

The incidence of all these complaints is increased significantly by the consumption of excess sugar (which makes programmes like the Great Celebrity Bake Off for Stand Up To Cancer very hard to understand).

This is not, then, just a health issue - although changing diets is now absolutely fundamental to improving health care outcomes. It is also fundamental to:

- \* Making the NHS affordable
- \* Maintaining what politicians think to be acceptable levels of government spending
- \* Solving the UK's productivity crisis
- \* Tackling some aspects of inequality

We could change diets. Regulation in the case of sugary drinks and the quantity of salt in food proves that. That we are not reveals four things:

- \* Wes Streeting is in hock to the big food industry and our supermarkets
- \* He does not want to solve our health care crisis

- \* The government is not seeking answers to the real problems that are actually affecting this country, which could be solved.
- \* The government will not take the actual action required to balance its books, even though it is possible for it to do so

In that case, my suggestion is very straightforward. A government that is faced with the evidence of a crisis, and its causes, and does nothing about it is not fit for office. This one should change, or go.