

## Global Conversation with DR Alessandro Demaio

### Commercial determinants of health and disease: the role of nutrition



DR Alessandro Demaio is a Medical Officer in Non-communicable Conditions and Nutrition at the World Health Organization in Geneva.

"We are what we eat" is the starting point from which our guest takes us through a journey into the analysis of nowadays nutrition issues. Scientific research shows the importance of nutrition in our life; during the past century we observed an incremental and inter-generational gain in this field, due to ever-increasing security and quality of the food we eat. Nevertheless, our diet has become the number one risk for disease. This is because today's issue of malnutrition has shifted from under nutrition to over and bad nutrition, which in turn leads to an increase in Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes. These conditions account for 70% of all deaths globally every year (WHO data) and this is an excessive loss both for humanity in general with years of life lost and for the poorer families, which lose many years of income.

The shift in wealth in the countries of the world has played a significant role in the rise of malnutrition as we interpret it today: from eating too little and starvation to eating too much and obesity. At the same time, it has deviated the most common diseases from infectious diseases to NCDs. This process took around two hundred years in developed countries such as Australia or Italy, whereas fast developing countries such as Indonesia or Mongolia have experienced it in just slightly more than a decade. This "squash" has witnessed a generation of people transiting from hunger to obesity, which has a double burden on malnutrition and has a tremendous health impact. DR Demaio highlighted the surprising fact that in these fast developing countries it is not uncommon to find family units where the parents experience under-nutrition whereas children struggle with obesity.

Malnutrition and NCDs are widespread in low and middle-income countries, but the rates of obesity grow according to the economic growth of States, with the U.S. being a major example for that. Furthermore, it appears to exist a link between obesity and relative poverty in high-income countries. This could be related to the unavailability of fresh food like fruit and vegetables in very poor areas, to the lack of safe structures for physical ability in certain neighbourhoods or simply to the economic advantage of buying cheaper industrial food. Anyway, due to the complexity of the problem, it is very difficult to underline the actual existence of this correlation and, in case, its size and major causes.

Shockingly enough Non-communicable diseases are not the only consequence of the massive consumption of cheap and harmful goods. The environmental impact of these goods is enormous and can be seen through in carbon emissions and dispersion of trash in the environment, which cannot sustain this strain anymore. Food systems, indeed, are the single biggest greenhouse gas emitter.



It is easy at this point to see that firms only face direct costs on wages on production whereas indirect costs on health and environment are pushed back to the population who carries the entire burden. But after all supply follows demand and therefore consumers are also responsible. Moreover, we witness a westernization of food suppliers, creating a global diet that is controlled by a relatively small number of people whose only aim is to make money.

How to cope with this critical and potentially devastating scenario then? According to DR Demaio, the first step is to encourage people to have diversified, healthy diets; governments then should step up, provide better plans to manage public health and try to limit opportunities for companies that promote unhealthy behaviours, for example by introducing sin taxes for soft drinks.

As our guest speaker told us, food represents both an opportunity and a challenge and it is with this last sentence on mind that we leave today's Global Conversation, more aware than ever of the need for a change in the way our food industry works.

Tommaso Subioli & Oliver Daniel Tomassi