Today, we are living in a new nutrition reality where rates of overweight and obesity globally keep rising with no signs of slowing down.

At the 2013 World Health Assembly, governments around the world committed to reach the nine voluntary targets outlined in the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013–2020. Among them, target 7 calls to “halt the rise in diabetes and obesity [based on 2010 levels].” Yet, whereas other targets related to non-communicable diseases (NCD) and risk factors such as reducing tobacco use and increasing access to cardiovascular disease medications are progressing positively, the Obesity: missing the 2025 global targets report shows that most countries have less than a 10% chance of meeting the obesity target. The global prevalence of overweight and obesity nearly doubled between 1980 and 2008, and according to the latest available data, obesity affects 10–30% of adults in the European Union (EU). Similar trends can be seen in children: as highlighted in the World Obesity Federation’s Atlas of Childhood Obesity, 4.3 million children between the age of five and 18 years were living with obesity in the EU.

Poor diets are now the main risk factor for the global burden of disease. Amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted that NCDs are a risk factor for becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 and more recently emphasised increased levels of risk for people living with obesity. It is therefore essential for governments around the world to ensure that obesity and other NCDs are recognised and integrated in national responses to the pandemic. But COVID-19 has also shed light on the disfunction of our current food systems and increased levels of food insecurity among the most vulnerable. The EU Farm to Fork Strategy recognises that the region is a global leader in providing safe and nutritious products, but flags persistent inequalities, with 33 million people unable to afford a quality meal every second day, while 20% of the food produced is wasted.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of a robust and resilient food system that functions in all circumstances, and is capable of ensuring access to a sufficient supply of affordable food citizens.”

The pandemic is giving the EU an opportunity to ‘build back better’ and develop more equitable and integrated food and health systems to promote healthy lifestyles and halt the rising prevalence of obesity. There needs to be transformative national and EU-policy approaches to address the interrelated pandemics of obesity and COVID-19, which must address underlying inequities to ensure #HealthForAll and a #HealthyRecovery. Governments need to ensure that their national response plans integrate and address malnutrition in all its forms, including undernutrition, overweight, obesity, stunting, wasting as well as other NCDs.

References