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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON WORLD DIGESTIVE HEALTH DAY

29 May 2021

The world is experiencing a growing pandemic of obesity. It affects people of all ages in all regions. Particularly concerning are the young people affected. In the past four decades, the percentage of 5–19-year-olds who were overweight or obese increased more than four-fold, from 4 per cent to 18 per cent. Globally, more than 4 million people die each year due to overweight or obesity.

Once considered a problem of high-income countries, overweight and obesity are now on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in urban settings. The vast majority of overweight or obese children live in developing countries, where the rate of increase has been more than 30 per cent higher than that of developed countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted how obesity is a threat to health, as obese patients have four times the risk of developing the most severe consequences of COVID-19. The World Health Assembly has established targets to curb obesity in children, adolescents and adults by 2025. At current rates of progress, none of these targets is likely to be met, yet obesity and its associated health problems can be curbed.

First, we need better prevention, starting with good nutrition during pregnancy, followed by exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life and continued breastfeeding for the first two years and beyond. Second, we need policies and investments that make it easier to access healthy and nutritious food – something that should be addressed at the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit. Third, people who are overweight or obese need better care in the primary healthcare system.

On this World Digestive Health Day, let us commit to work together to address obesity for a sustainable and healthy world.