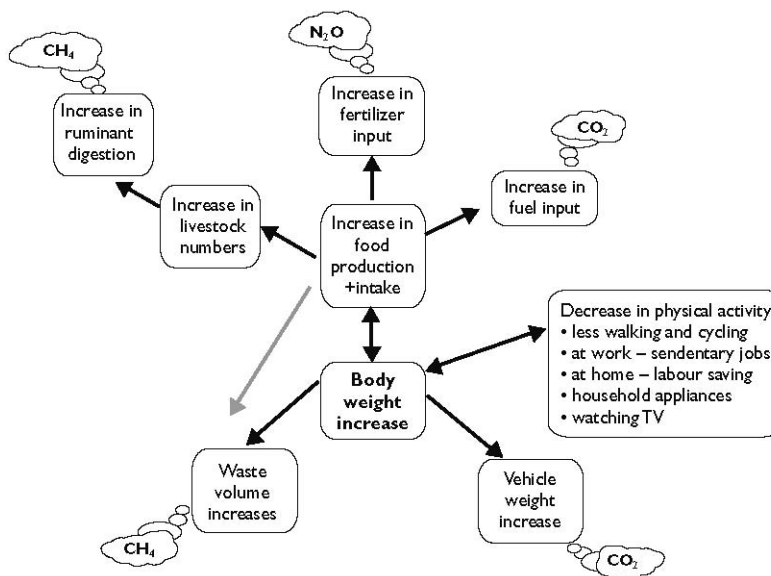
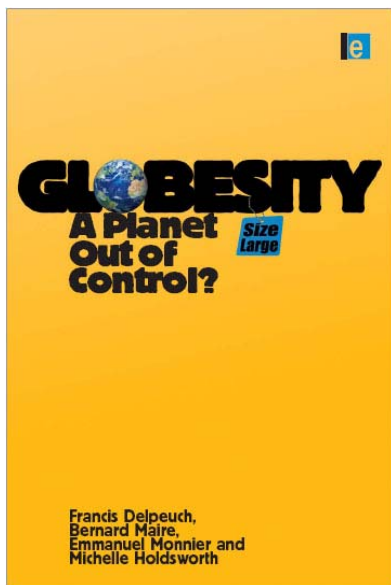


New book explains the link between obesity and climate change, and offers some solutions



Evidence for an unexpected relationship

Obesity and climate change are both crucial issues of global concern. At first glance it may seem odd to link them together and to suggest that obesity is contributing to climate change. Can what we choose to eat really have an impact on global warming? Around 33 per cent of the world’s adult population (1.3 billion people) is now obese or overweight (Kelly et al, 2008). In addition, carbon emissions are high and have increased from 250ppm (50 years ago) to 380ppm in 2007 (Egger, 2008). Some have suggested that it is no coincidence that countries with higher obesity rates tend to have higher carbon emissions, such as the US.

Recent contributions to mainstream scholarly journals, such as *The Lancet*, *British Medical Journal*, *New Scientist* and *Obesity Reviews*, all highlight the interrelation between obesity and climate change, emphasizing how their causes and policy solutions are linked, putting the issue on the public agenda. The UK government commissioned the ‘Foresight report’ (Department of Health, 2007) with a view to answer the question of how a sustainable response to obesity could be delivered, and Alan Johnson, the UK Secretary of State for Health, warned that the obesity crisis is as serious as climate change for Britons. To support the UK government’s ambition to be the first major country to reverse the growing tide of obesity, a strategy document followed in 2008 *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A Crossgovernment Strategy for England*. This document, as well as the Foresight report, make clear links between both the causes and the solutions to both obesity and climate change, stating that the ‘causes of excess weight are similar to climate change in their complexity’ (Department of Health, 2008).

The financial impact of obesity and overweight is now starting to be felt and the cost to the UK economy alone is an estimated £10 billion a year, which is projected to increase fivefold in the next 40 years due to escalating obesity rates (female obesity has almost tripled and male obesity

quadrupled in the last quarter of a century). Many of the costs from increasing obesity worldwide will be carbon intensive, such as increased reliance on medical services and use of drugs for ‘treating’ obesity, as well as managing its health consequences: cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers, to name a few.

Similar solutions to obesity and climate change

Over half the world’s population are city dwellers; therefore changes in urban design are fundamental to making physical activity easier and the norm. This would benefit both carbon emissions and individuals’ body weight. Some researchers (Woodcock et al, 2007) have suggested that radical action is needed to restrict car travel combined with measures to encourage walking/cycling. A low-carbon transport system involving walking/cycling will help to reduce obesity and it should be a priority for national and local governments to provide safe cycle lanes, footpaths and extensive public transport routes.

Ensuring sustainable catering and food procurement policies is one possible approach, so that local foods are sourced wherever possible and particularly for basic foods produced with minimal processing. Healthy, less calorific foods are therefore more sustainable for the environment, as they are less carbon intensive.

Strategies for managing climate change including personal carbon trading have been advocated as a means to reduce obesity in populations by increasing energy expenditure and decreasing energy-dense food intake, as well as cutting carbon emissions contributing to climate change (Egger, 2008). This would involve a carbon bank attributing carbon units to every country, and each individual would have a set level of units that could be redeemed when buying a non-renewable fuel. There are also suggestions that this could be adopted by the food industry, which would make highcalorie foods more expensive. Most obesity experts would accept that no single approach can tip energy balance sufficiently to influence obesity and carbon emissions, therefore a whole array of strategies is needed.

The potential of supermarkets to influence greenhouse gas emissions was recognized in a report commissioned by the UK government (Sustainable Development Commission, 2008), which states ‘as gatekeepers of the food system, supermarkets are in a powerful position to create a greener, healthier fairer food system through their influence on supply chains, consumer behaviour and their own operations’. The report goes on to suggest that existing conflicts need to be resolved between how diets can be both healthy and sustainable (including sustainably sourced fish, meat and dairy). A policy that encourages supermarkets to demand reformulated products and shift marketing to healthier foods will help obesity, but will also direct consumers away from more carbon-intensive food products.

Educating the public to change their attitudes to both obesity and behaving in a more sustainable manner will not be enough. Attitudes are not necessarily a driver of behaviour and it has been suggested that changes in attitude are more powerful when they result from a change of behaviour (Egger, 2008), such as making some behaviours taboo. So sometimes radical changes in the environment need to be imposed (such as banning smoking in public places) to shift society’s attitudes. Egger (2008) sums this up by saying, ‘regulate and legislate where you can; educate and motivate where you can’t’.

Bibliographic details

Globesity: A Planet Out of Control?

Francis Delpeuch, Bernard Maire, Emmanuel Monnier and Michelle Holdsworth

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A genetic link?

The role of genetics in obesity

The Myth of the Ideal Weight

Mixed messages and pseudoscience in the healthy eating debate

Praise for *Globesity*

'This book shows how closely interwoven are the forces which shape our dietary health and our environmental and economic security. It recognises that world history is at a point of transition, and that there is hope that we can yet avoid future disaster.'

Tim Lobstein, International Association for the Study of Obesity, UK

*'Readers of *Globesity* may be dismayed to discover that obesity is not a problem exclusive to Americans. It affects Europeans and people throughout the world. This thorough and well written book provides all the evidence needed to convince anyone that the health threats are real and demand immediate action from governments as well as individuals.'*

Marion Nestle, Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, and author of *Food Politics* and *What to Eat*

'The threats posed by obesity, and the rate at which the incidence has been rising, are unsustainable. The authors provide a compelling analysis of the causes and consequences of obesity, and set out the conditions under which the problems can be addressed.'

Erik Millstone, Professor of Science Policy, University of Sussex

Sources for Featured Excerpt

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