



# Preventing childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes: advancing leadership for sustainable impact

Side event to the 79<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly

19 May 2026 | 18:00-20:00 CEST  
Red Cross Museum, Geneva  
Livestream, Zoom



# Introduction

## Background

Ending childhood obesity is an urgent public health priority with major implications for equity, health system resilience and sustainable development. Recent global estimates show that overweight and obesity among school-age children and adolescents now exceed underweight for the first time, reflecting a profound shift in the global malnutrition landscape. This trend threatens the long-term health and productivity of children, communities and nations, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Rapid urbanisation, changing food environments and limited access to prevention, early diagnosis and care are driving this growing challenge.

Childhood overweight and obesity significantly increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) later in life. With diabetes cases projected to continue rising sharply over the coming decades, speakers throughout the event stressed the urgency of adopting life-course approaches that prioritise maternal health, risk reduction, healthy food environments, physical activity and early intervention.

Held on the margins of the 79th World Health Assembly, the side event convened policymakers, civil society leaders, healthcare professionals, researchers, advocates and people living with diabetes and obesity to discuss evidence-based solutions and strengthen political leadership for coordinated action. The event also introduced the World Diabetes Day 2026–2027 theme: “Early Diagnosis and Risk Reduction.”



# Introduction

## Overview

The side event was co-hosted by the International Diabetes Federation (IDF), the World Diabetes Foundation (WDF), and the World Obesity Federation (WOF). Approximately 80 participants attended in person, while online participation exceeded 850 participants during the live stream.



The discussion was moderated by Mr Shawn K. Baker, Executive Vice President of Programs and Partnerships at Helen Keller Intl. Speakers included:

- Dr Katrin Engelhardt, WHO Department of Nutrition and Food Safety, Switzerland
- Dr Reynold 'Ofanoa, Chief Executive Officer for Health, Ministry of Health, Kingdom of Tonga
- Prof Eugene Sobngwi, Director of Health Care Organisation and Technology at the Ministry of Public Health of Cameroon and Senior Diabetes Researcher
- Ms Hun Jeudyla, Vice Chief of the School Health Research and Innovation Bureau of the Department of School Health, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Dr Simón Barquera, President, World Obesity Federation; Institute of Public Health Mexico
- Dr Mark Barone, Founder of ForumCCNTs and IDF Blue Circle Voice
- Ms Amber Huertt-Garcia, Board Member, World Obesity Federation
- Ms Sanne Frost Helt, Director for Policy, Programme and Partnerships, World Diabetes Foundation
- Mrs Emma Zwiebler, CEO, World Federation of Sporting Goods Industry
- Prof Peter Schwarz, President, International Diabetes Federation

Speakers emphasised that childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes can no longer be treated as isolated health concerns. Instead, they require integrated, multisectoral policy responses that address simultaneously food systems, schools, maternal health, physical activity, commercial determinants of health, and social inequities.



[Watch the event recording](#)

## Opening remarks



### Addressing the global nutrition transition

**Mr Shawn K. Baker**

Opening the event, Mr Shawn K. Baker reflected on the global nutrition transition and the growing dominance of unhealthy ultraprocessed foods in children's diets, including during the earliest stages of life. He stressed that overweight and obesity among children now rival undernutrition as major global health threats.

Mr Baker emphasised that nutritious food lies at the centre of both agendas – addressing undernutrition while also reducing the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes and other NCDs. He highlighted the need for enabling policy and community environments that make healthy choices easier for families and children.



### Strengthening policy action and regulatory measures

**Dr Katrin Engelhardt**

Dr Katrin Engelhardt warned that childhood obesity is increasingly contributing to earlier onset type 2 diabetes, particularly in LMICs where health systems have limited capacity to respond. She stressed that obesity and diabetes are shaped by structural and commercial determinants, including unhealthy food environments and digital marketing targeting children.

She reiterated WHO recommendations including restrictions on unhealthy food marketing, front-of-pack warning labels, fiscal measures, healthy school food environments, breastfeeding promotion, and stronger integration of obesity risk reduction and early diagnosis into primary healthcare systems. Dr Engelhardt concluded that reducing the risk of childhood obesity and diabetes requires coordinated multisectoral action across the life course.



### The Pacific perspective on obesity and type 2 diabetes risk reduction

**Dr Reynold 'Ofanoa**

Speaking on behalf of the Kingdom of Tonga, Dr Reynold 'Ofanoa described the Pacific region as carrying one of the world's heaviest obesity burdens, with obesity and NCD rates continuing to rise despite years of policy action.

He highlighted Tonga's implementation of WHO "best buy" interventions, including taxes on unhealthy foods and sugar-sweetened beverages, regulations governing food sold in schools, and health-promoting school initiatives integrating nutrition, physical activity and mental wellbeing.

Dr Ofanoa also referenced Tonga's free school breakfast programme, aimed at improving dietary quality and establishing healthier eating habits early in life. He stressed that effective risk reduction requires environments that make healthy choices easier and more accessible for children and adolescents.

# Turning policy into action

PANEL 1



## Cameroon: co-creating school-based interventions

**Prof Eugene Sobngwi**

Prof Eugene Sobngwi described the “triple burden” of malnutrition affecting many African countries, where obesity coexists with undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. He stressed that schools are critical platforms for obesity and diabetes risk reduction, particularly when communities are actively involved in shaping interventions.

He pointed to Cameroon’s co-constructed school-based initiatives promoting healthier food environments and behavioural change, including the student-led “Sugar-Free Thursdays” initiative, which is now being scaled nationally. Prof Sobngwi also advocated for life-course approaches linking maternal nutrition, adolescent health and future diabetes risk, while noting growing political recognition of obesity and diabetes as urgent national concerns.



## Mexico: advancing fiscal and regulatory policies

**Dr Simón Barquera**

Dr Simón Barquera discussed Mexico’s implementation of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes and front-of-pack warning labels, noting that these measures contributed to reductions in sugar consumption and encouraged food reformulation. He also highlighted legislation banning sugary beverages and ultraprocessed foods in schools nationwide, while acknowledging ongoing implementation challenges.

Dr Barquera warned that digital marketing targeting children through social media, gaming and influencers is evolving rapidly, creating major regulatory challenges for governments and public health actors.



## Cambodia: transforming school food environments

**Ms Hun Jeudyla**

Ms Hun Jeudyla outlined Cambodia’s efforts to position schools at the centre of obesity and diabetes risk reduction strategies, describing school health promotion as a national development priority. She highlighted policies restricting the sale and advertising of harmful food products in and around schools, alongside initiatives promoting physical activity and healthier diets among students.

Ms Jeudyla also stressed the importance of interministerial collaboration and community-based initiatives supporting healthier school food environments.

# Lived experience at the centre: shaping policy for obesity & diabetes into action

## ADVOCATES PANEL



**Dr Mark Barone**

Dr Mark Barone and Ms Amber Huertt-Garcia stressed the importance of meaningfully involving people living with obesity and diabetes in policy design and implementation.

Dr Barone shared examples from Brazil that promote fresh, locally produced foods in schools and reduce access to ultraprocessed foods. Both speakers also stressed the importance of addressing obesity stigma and avoiding shame-based approaches.



**Ms Huertt-Garcia**

Ms Huertt-Garcia highlighted initiatives improving access to nutritious school meals and opportunities for physical activity, while emphasising the importance of listening directly to children and adolescents when developing policies.



PREVENTING CHILDHOOD OBESITY AND TYPE 2 DIABETES:  
ADVANCING LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

VOICE AT THE CENTRE

MARK BARONE  
Co-Chair of ForumCCNTs  
Blue Circle Voice

MS AMBER HUERTT-GARCIA  
Lived Experience Trustee member of  
the World Obesity Federation  
United States

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# Reducing the risk: evidence and strategies for ending childhood obesity and preventing type 2 diabetes

PANEL 2



## Risk reduction must become the central priority

**Prof Peter Schwarz**

Prof Peter Schwarz stressed that obesity and type 2 diabetes among children and adolescents are increasing rapidly worldwide and argued that risk reduction strategies must address both biological and social drivers of disease. He highlighted unhealthy diets and ultraprocessed foods as key contributors to early metabolic disease and called for stronger accountability from the food industry.

Discussing the World Diabetes Day 2026–2027 theme “Early Diagnosis and Risk Reduction,” he underscored that risk reduction should become a central pillar of diabetes strategies globally, alongside greater promotion of physical activity.



## Translating commitments into community action

**Ms Sanne Frost Helt**

Ms Sanne Frost Helt emphasised that childhood obesity risk reduction requires multisectoral and systemic responses rather than isolated interventions. She pointed to the challenge of translating political commitments into practical implementation involving schools, health systems, food systems and families simultaneously.

Ms Frost Helt also emphasised maternal health, antenatal care, breastfeeding support and gestational diabetes interventions as critical opportunities to reduce obesity and diabetes risk across generations.



## Promoting movement and physical activity

**Mrs Emma Zwiebler**

Mrs Emma Zwiebler stressed that physical inactivity remains one of the leading risk factors for obesity while often receiving insufficient policy attention. She noted that 81% of young people globally do not meet recommended physical activity levels and argued that risk reduction strategies should promote both organised sport and everyday movement. To this end, Mrs Zwiebler called for stronger implementation of the WHO Global Action Plan on Physical Activity and greater efforts to make physical activity more accessible and inclusive, particularly for girls and underserved communities.

## Closing remarks

Closing the event, Mr Baker stressed that undernutrition and obesity should not be treated as competing agendas, as both require healthier food systems and enabling environments. He emphasised that sufficient evidence already exists to act decisively on obesity and diabetes risk reduction through stronger policy action, community ownership and political leadership.

The event concluded with a collective call for urgent, coordinated action to strengthen healthier food environments and reduce the growing burden of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes worldwide.



80 

people attended the event in Geneva.

1,794 

people joined online on the day of the event.

2,600+ 

people registered to follow the event online.

350+ 

views of the event recording were registered on the IDF YouTube channel in the 1<sup>st</sup> week.



## Attendees' feedback

133 

people responded to the feedback questionnaire, giving the event a 9/10 rating.

48% 

said the interaction between presenters and speakers was the highlight of the event.

133 people responded to the feedback questionnaire circulated to all registrants for the event.

Most respondents (48.87%) said they most appreciated the interaction between presenters and speakers, followed by the panellists' interventions (31.58%). They rated the event's dynamism at 8.81 out of 10, its level of interest at 9.24, and the overall experience at 9.02.

Respondents suggested several topics related to type 2 diabetes for future IDF-WDF-WOF events, including the scientific aspects of screening and prevention of T2D, malnutrition among people with type 2 diabetes, and the influence of country-specific cultural diversity on food habits and childhood obesity as a key risk factor for T2D.

**"The event was very informative and well organised. For future events, I would appreciate more interactive discussion sessions and additional opportunities for participants to ask questions and engage with the speakers."**

**"Thank you for organising this informative session. The speakers provided valuable insights on childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes prevention. The event increased my understanding of these important public health issues."**

**"Very interesting local solutions were presented, and some might have been published and thus could be used as models in other settings."**



