

Commission: Health Committee

Question: Obesity

Author: Tunisia

Since the beginning of the 21 century, obesity and overweight have increased above all in middle-income countries and particularly in urban settings, according to the WHO. Tunisia, which in the last years has known a remarkable economic growth, is a country where 66.3% of the population live in urban areas. Consequently, there is in Tunisia a high, alarming rate of obesity: 23.7% (of people aged +20) of the Tunisian population are obese, and there is a significant difference between men (13.9% of Tunisian men are obese) and women (33.4% of Tunisian women are obese). These rates are higher than the average of the WHO for the region (13% for men and 24.5% for women).

The increase of obesity is related to the westernization of lifestyles. Nowadays, Tunisian people spend a good part of their free time in front of the computer or the television without practicing any physical activity. Moreover, the consumption of junk food is now normal and frequent in the diet of Tunisians. The increase of obesity is highly worrying in the Tunisian youth. According to a survey made by the EMRO, even if Tunisian adolescents have the basic knowledge of what a well-balanced and healthy diet is, and of the importance of physical activity, teenagers prefer street food rather than home-made meals. The survey noticed that the obesity among girls is more important than among boys.

The Tunisian traditional lifestyle and alimentation are very healthy. It is not by chance that Tunisia is the second largest exporter of organic products in Africa. This provides a good starting point to improve the diet of the population, especially among the youth. A good public campaign by the authorities to promote the consumption of organic fruit and vegetables could have a very positive effect. Particularly if it is connected to a feeling of national pride in a country which is such an important producer of organic food, and which would use it to improve the health of its citizens.

Tunisia has shown that it can open new roads for positive developments in the region. It is the only country where the Arab Spring succeeded in strengthening democratic institutions. It can now lead the way in these other and equally important aspects of the welfare of its inhabitants: food, exercise, health. All of them important elements in the Mediterranean way of life which is so profoundly associated to the Tunisian tradition.

Obesity increases the possibility of developing conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancers, back pain and sciatica. Article 38 of the Constitution of 2014 recalls that health is a human right, and provides all the services to assure the wellbeing of all our habitants. Consequently, we must make sure that our Public Health System is capable of caring for all patients with problems relating to obesity, now and in the future. We will need of course the required resources, and we expect to include our program in the agenda of international organizations and bilateral donors.

Finally, Tunisia can be a success story in the fight against obesity in middle-income countries. It can also be a success story in the renewal of life styles towards healthier models, better connected to her own cultural roots. We have the purpose, we have the vision, and we have the roadmap. We only need the solidarity of our partners