

World Obesity Federation – World Cup scorecard

As the FIFA World Cup kicks off, Saudi Arabia secured the unwanted title of being the country in the competition with the highest proportion of adults who are overweight or obese. New figures, based on data from the World Health Organization (WHO) reveal how the 32 finalists are facing an even bigger challenge than the top title in football: the obesity crisis.

The World Obesity Federation has compiled a scorecard, which ranks all of the teams playing in the World Cup according to the proportion of adults with excess bodyweight (BMI>25KG M2). The World Cup is a great competition to illustrate this information given the prevalence of obesity across the planet.

According to latest data from the WHO, 70 percent of adults in Saudi Arabia are overweight or obese, more than double that of the lowest ranking World Cup country, Japan. England has the highest obesity score of the European countries and comes in fourth overall with a staggering 63 percent of adults registering as overweight or obese. Australia (third) and Mexico (second) highlight that obesity has run rampant across the world and urgently needs action.

Obesity is a gateway disease to several non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including cancer, diabetes, and heart disease, and has reached epidemic proportions both in developed and developing countries. The scorecard clearly shows the effect on developed countries and some middle-income countries like Egypt and Iran. We must not forget though - there are many countries, that are typically associated with under-nutrition, like India, that now are facing even bigger challenges from people who are overweight or obese. India has the second highest number of obese children in the world, after China, with 14.4 million children.

Once again FIFA has officially partnered with big soda, big food and big alcohol. We have seen the likes of Coca-Cola, whose campaign for the 2018 World Cup is 'Being Ready', lighting up stadiums in Russia, along with the world's favourite football stars. People from all over the world, not just the participating countries, will be watching this and children from the USA and India will be seeing the pinnacle of footballing skill and athleticism being associated with food and drinks that contribute to the obesity epidemic. It is a paradox that we could all do without.

A growing number of countries are adopting measures to tackle the obesity, in a sign that governments are waking up to the economic and social damage of this epidemic. Although the report of the WHO High level Commission on NCDs fell short of recommending soda taxes, it is nonetheless a measure that is increasingly being used by countries around the world as one of a range of measures to tackle the obesity epidemic. We would love to see FIFA take action to stop the likes of Coca-Cola being an official partner.

World leaders will soon have the chance to take action and to make bold commitments to tackle obesity at the UN High Level Meeting on 27 September in New York.