

## **Protecting the development and implementation of public health policies from undue influence of unhealthy commodity industries**

*(Statement by the WHO Civil Society Working Group on Noncommunicable Diseases)*

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We, the 36 members\* of WHO Civil Society Working Group (CSWG) on Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs), earnestly call on WHO Member States, United Nations agencies, programmes and funds, international global health and humanitarian organizations, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and the media to protect public health policies from the undue influence of unhealthy commodity industries.

Governments have an obligation to protect and promote the health of their citizens, but interference in policy development and implementation by unhealthy commodity industries is well-documented[1]. The tactics of industries which profit from unhealthy commodities, including tobacco, alcohol beverages, ultra-processed food and sugar-sweetened beverages, breast milk substitutes and fossil fuels are directly at odds with the fundamental right of every human being to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health.

People living with NCDs are not only more vulnerable to co-morbidities and exposed to the disruption of health services due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also more likely to develop serious illness or die from complications. This challenge is exacerbated by the activities of unhealthy commodity industries which produce products that contribute to the global burden of NCDs.

Strategies to promote products that are detrimental to health have been promoted and exploited by the tobacco and alcohol industries for decades. Since the onset of the pandemic, we are witnessing a concerning surge in such tactics, including lobbying the classification of their operations as “essential” business during lockdown, disseminating misinformation, conducting misleading research and undermining evidence-based interventions, stepping up digital marketing of unhealthy commodities, circumventing existing regulations, and demanding tax cuts - while at the same time offering donations in attempts to appear socially responsible.

Maintaining the integrity of food systems and the movement of food along the food chain, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is an essential function to which all stakeholders need to contribute. However, it is disturbing to witness the recklessness with which the ultra-processed food and sugar-sweetened beverages industries are exploiting the fragility of our world to position unhealthy commodities as daily needs. Marketing of these unhealthy products has significant consequences, particularly on children and youths, and on families living in poverty, compounding health and economic risks for vulnerable populations.

It is therefore vital to protect public health by safeguarding against industry influence, including conflict of interest in policy development and implementation from global to the local level. Robust measures have been introduced by countries to protect national policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry (based on Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the related guidelines adopted

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by the governing body of the Convention), and effective regulatory measures should be developed and implemented for other unhealthy commodities.

Furthermore, unhealthy commodity industries should be held accountable for advancing the NCD epidemic by aggravating its risk factors and social, economic and environmental determinants. Strong accountability measures will contribute to protecting and improving the lives of people living with or at risk of NCDs, and uphold the rights of children and young people, while also being essential for health security as we build back better in a post-COVID-19 world.

The WHO Civil Society Working Group on NCDs calls upon all the above-listed stakeholders to protect and promote public health as follows:

- Recognise and raise awareness of the risks of industry and allies\* interference in public health policymaking, including policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation and public health research;
- Enforce requirements for institutions, employees and affiliates to identify, prevent and manage real and perceived conflicts of interest and undue influence, to preserve institutional integrity and reputation;
- Reject all forms of funding or in-kind-contributions from unhealthy commodity industries and their allies;
- De-normalise practices presented by unhealthy commodity industries and their allies as “corporate social responsibility” initiatives;
- Practice full transparency in instances when engagement with unhealthy commodity industries and their allies is essential, such as when necessary for their effective regulation.

In addition, governments should:

- Develop and implement policies to regulate marketing and other commercial activities by unhealthy commodity industries and their allies;
- Exclude unhealthy commodity industries from government investment benefits, subsidies, and tax exemptions.

Countries that are Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control are urged to ensure full implementation of Article 5.3 of the Convention by utilizing the relevant implementation guidelines; countries that are not should strive to act in the spirit of the treaty.

The WHO CSWG on NCDs remains committed to supporting all stakeholders in the fight against the NCDs pandemic.

\***Allies** here is defined as SAPROs which stands for “Social Aspect Public Relations Organisations; see further here: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00024/full>: Social Aspects Public Relations Organizations, “front groups” of risk industries

[1] Petticrew M, Katikireddi SV, Knai C, et al ‘Nothing can be done until everything is done’: the use of complexity arguments by food, beverage, alcohol and gambling industries. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2017;71:1078-1083.

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