
‘Marketing Exposed’ report shows how marketing undermines health

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In November, the Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAi) issued a report on how the advertising, promotion and sponsorship practices of ultra-processed food and beverage products (UPPs) are affecting human and planetary health while targeting vulnerable populations and serving as “corporate washing” practices that allow the industry to have privileged spaces at policy-making tables.

As GHAi’s Legal Advisor for Food Policy, based in Argentina, working on this report built directly on human rights work I’ve done in Argentina, Brazil and Vietnam. The food we consume, produce, manufacture, distribute and commercialize impacts the environment and society as a whole. What we eat is deeply intertwined with power, and political and social structures at all levels of governance.

Multiple actors are responsible for promoting food systems that are truly equitable, sustainable, and oriented toward the common good. However, the private sector often impedes this from happening through profit-oriented strategies, such as marketing. The “[Marketing Exposed](#) [1]” report seeks to uncover these practices that threaten healthy food policy and put public health at risk.

As part of GHAi’s [Industry Watch](#) [2] initiative, we analyze and collect data on the corporate behaviors of Big Food and Big Soda that undermine the formulation and implementation of public health policies aimed at promoting healthy food environments. This work served as the basis for this new report –the third one of the series– which contains a summary qualitative analysis of more than 300 examples obtained through public sources from more than 52 countries.

The report highlights concerning global industry practices mirrored in diverse countries and regions. It also identifies four primary ways the marketing of ultra-processed food and beverage products threatens public health policy and promotes unhealthy diets that are causing deadly consequences to the consumer:

1. The marketing of UPPs produces a cascade of detrimental effects, shaping unhealthy environments and burdening states and populations with adverse health outcomes and other negative externalities.

2. In addition to advertising, promotion, and sponsorship practices, UPP marketing can contain corporate washing actions (such as Corporate Social Responsibility) that allow the industry to capture and influence new, vulnerable audiences while also gaining privileged spaces at policy making tables.
3. The marketing of ultra-processed products is aggressive, insidious, and ubiquitous; it allows the industry to dictate what consumers should eat, while displacing the traditional food elements of different cultures.
4. Children and adolescents are victims of commercial exploitation due to corporations saturating the food market with unhealthy products.

These reasons highlight the need for marketing regulations of junk food and beverages and urgency to make the industry accountable for its harmful practices. Even though adequate food and nutrition is a human right, the UPP industry has attempted to transform food (including water) into a commodity. It also fails to take responsibility for its impact on health, instead placing the blame solely on individuals or on children's caretakers.

This is a deeply personal issue, as the current food system is making people around the world sick and diminishing their quality of life, while also accelerating the rate of climate change.

Ultra-processed food and beverage products are linked with unsustainable agricultural practices, plastic pollution, CO2 emissions, land grabbing, and many other cross-cutting issues that affect present and future generations. Additionally, the industry targets its marketing of unhealthy products at children and adolescents to ensure profits over time.

While the world waits for comprehensive and mandatory marketing restrictions, the current agribusiness-oriented food systems are deteriorating, and human health is threatened by diseases and preventable deaths with high economic and social costs.

“[Marketing Exposed](#) [1]” explains why the UPP industry should no longer be shaping unhealthy environments, burdening the population, influencing policy makers, exploiting children and destroying food cultures.

In this complex global context, CSOs play a key role in advocating for public health policy that pushes for the common good over industry interests. The report offers recommendations to governments and CSOs, advocates, and human rights defenders working on these issues to play a key role in countering industry opposition and influence at all levels of governance. These actions include:

- Enacting/advocating for mandatory and comprehensive corporate marketing restrictions based on independent evidence.
- Protecting children and other populations that are in vulnerable situations or conditions from commercial exploitation.
- Rejecting alternative policy proposals positioned by private actors that guarantee corporate autonomy and the maintenance of negative externalities.
- Excluding the UPP industry and its allies from the policy making table at all levels of governance.

The negative implications of UPP marketing are preventable. Governments must respond to this threat and CSOs are key actors to advance this work.

About the author:

Luján Abramo is the Legal Advisor for the Global Food Policy program. In this role, she collaborates with and supports partner organizations across the program. Previously, Luján analyzed tobacco control and road safety legislation for the Legal Consortium at the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and GHAI's Road Safety team. She also served as a legal advisor for the Food Policy program and worked on food policy issues for the Pan American Health Organization. She has vast experience working in the field of Human Rights in Argentina, Brazil and Vietnam.

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