

Negative impact of ultra-processed foods demands strong response from governments and civil society

Experts meeting in Panama say a social movement is needed to support health-promoting policies against opposition from economic interests

Panama, 11 June 2015 (PAHO/WHO) -- Experts from 12 countries of Latin America meeting in Panama this week urged a stronger role by civil society in supporting and promoting policies on food, tobacco, alcohol, and physical activity to counter the epidemic of noncommunicable diseases in the region.

The experts, convened by the Coalition Latin Healthy America, the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) and the Ministry of Health of Panama, said it is crucial for civil society to take an active role in defending public health policies and measures, especially when they provoke opposition from economic interests.

Latin America is in the forefront of promoting policies on tobacco control, healthy diet, and increased physical activity. Among examples cited by the participants were:

- Mexico has become the first country in the world to adopt a tax on sugary beverages, noted Alejandro Calvillo, executive director of Poder del Consumidor (“Consumer Power”) in Mexico.
- Ecuador has advanced with front-of-package labeling that allows consumers to rapidly decide if products they are buying are good for their families’ health.
- Argentina was the first country in the Americas to eliminate harmful trans fats.
- Brazil has adopted new nutritional guidelines that are a model for countries around the world.

Enrique Jacoby, PAHO/WHO advisor on nutrition and physical activity, said that multinational food and beverage companies, like the tobacco and alcohol industries, have tried to block legislative and regulatory action in several countries, and in others have tried prevent or delay the implementation of these measures.

"The industry tries to place all the responsibility on the consumer, but there is broad evidence that their ultra-processed products and their aggressive marketing have created an environment that leads to overweight and obesity, with awful consequences in terms of disability and deaths from noncommunicable diseases."

Beatriz Champagne, of the Inter-American Heart Foundation, said that the active role of multinationals is what makes the voice of independent civil society so critical, "to make it clear that we are vigilant and to help ensure that governments play their role to protect the common good and not give in to pressure."

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), also known as chronic diseases, are the leading cause of death in nearly all countries of the Americas. They include heart disease,

stroke, cancer, chronic pulmonary disease, and diabetes. An estimated three out of four deaths in the Americas are from NCDs.

Scientific evidence suggests that NCDs are highly preventable through the reduction of their main risk factors. Healthy and nutritious foods, together with active, smoke-free living and avoidance of harmful use of alcohol, can reduce the risk of NCDs.

Policies that support better nutrition include regulations on marketing of ultra-processed foods (generally high in calories and low in nutrients), promotion of healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, promotion of healthier environments in schools and workplaces, taxes on harmful foods, and incentives to make healthier options more available and acceptable.

Other participants in this week's event included congressmen Guido Girardi of Chile and Jaime Delgado of Peru, both of whom have been active public health advocates in their countries, successfully promoting some of these measures. They described the difficulties of advancing the health agenda in the face of industry lobbying.