

How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of Covid-19 / **Executive Summary**

Despite growing evidence of the need to adopt healthy diets, the COVID-19 pandemic generated a unique opportunity for the food and beverage industry to thrive in low- to middle-income countries. During the crisis, multinationals such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nestlé, among others, quickly promoted unhealthy, ultra-processed foods and sugary drinks.

These companies engaged in multiple marketing strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, appealing to sentiments like nostalgia and comfort as people around the world quarantined at home. Healthy food policy advocates expressed concern about such food industry activities, including:

- **Coupling “solidarity actions” with aggressive marketing of junk food and sugary drink brands, which helped polish corporate images (nutri-washing);**
- **Positioning ultra-processed food and drinks as “essential products” when they are not healthy foods;**
- **Carrying out philanthropic actions while actively lobbying against healthy food policies; and**
- **Donating ultra-processed food and drinks to vulnerable populations, including to children in school programs and to other low-income populations, contributing to worsening health conditions like obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease and exacerbating undernutrition with nutritionally poor foods and beverages.**

The Big Food marketing strategies appealed to consumers' vulnerability during the lockdown to promote junk food as an elixir for tough times. Employees, frontline workers, and a public looking for support and hope found an industry promoting their products as a source of comfort. In this challenging moment where disinfection and food safety were top concerns, the industry associated “*food safety*” with “*healthy food*.” This deceptive message helped to position unhealthy food and drink as safe and vital for household consumption. The industry also enhanced its role as an essential player in the food system by highlighting its commitment to uninterrupted distribution.

While corporate social responsibility (CSR) can benefit communities, the food and beverage industry leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to create alliances with public entities and civil society, which directly or indirectly advanced their interests. Their response to the food needs of the most vulnerable populations in developing countries, many still struggling with increased social needs and negative economic impact, was to donate unhealthy packaged foods and sugary drinks. They also donated and promoted baby formula, a breach of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes because it discourages breastfeeding and affects early childhood nutrition.

As COVID-19 spread globally, data emerged that people with obesity and diet-related diseases were more susceptible to complications and death from COVID-19. Countries already fighting an obesity epidemic faced the threat of a sicker population and higher rates of mortality. The pandemic also highlighted how policies aiming to create healthier food environments, such as front-of-package warning labels, healthy school food policies, marketing restrictions, and taxes on junk food and sugary drinks all could have helped consumers to make healthier food choices during this critical time.

This report documents how food and beverage industry giants exploited COVID-19 to further an image of themselves as good corporate citizens. It also underscores how weak conflict-of-interest protocols and the lack of healthy food regulations in some countries left the door open for the industry to undermine advances in healthy food policy. Finally, the report offers recommendations to governments and civil society for protecting the right to adequate, healthy food. Governments are called to regulate food assistance programs during emergencies, to guarantee conflict-free policymaking scenarios, and to implement healthy food policies based on international recommendations.