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Big Food Used Global Pandemic to Aggressively Promote Unhealthy, Ultra-Processed Food & Sugary Drinks

New report finds that food and beverage industry giants directly and indirectly blocked healthy food policies while putting vulnerable consumers at even greater risk

WASHINGTON, D.C. – A new report released by the Global Health Advocacy Incubator [GHAI] details how food and beverage corporations – such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Nestlé, and PepsiCo – seized the coronavirus pandemic as a unique opportunity to promote their ultra-processed foods to especially vulnerable populations around the world.

Facing Two Pandemics: *How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19* reveals how the lack of healthy food regulations worldwide enabled “Big Food” to use the global COVID-19 crisis, publicly portraying themselves as do-gooders while directly and indirectly influencing policy and putting disadvantaged people at even greater risk. These same corporations – whose ultra-processed food and sugary drinks were already contributing to rising rates of obesity, malnutrition, and diet-related diseases – used the pandemic to position themselves and their unhealthy products as essential and safe, putting those compromised populations at even higher risk of coronavirus complications and mortality. GHAI collected more than 280 examples from 18 countries between March and July 2020.

“Based on the examples we gathered, it quickly became clear that Big Food was working hard to position themselves as a crucial part of the pandemic solution,” said Holly Wong, GHAI Vice President, “while furthering their own gains by hindering the advancement of public health policies.”

The GHAI report outlines key ways “Big Food” exploited the coronavirus pandemic to their advantage:

- **They polished their public images with pandemic “solidarity actions,” while aggressively promoting their junk food and sugary drink brands.** They donated ultra-processed products to children in school programs and low-income populations, when these people needed nutritious foods. They also donated and promoted baby formula, breaching the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. *In South Africa, Coca-Cola collaborated with a nonprofit to donate “cooldrinks” – soft drinks – to local healthcare centers, including an obesity care center.*
- **They touted unhealthy ultra-processed food and drinks as essential, safe products,** equating food safety with healthy food. *In Colombia, PepsiCo requested government permission to maintain production during the lockdown, portraying their products as essential components of the family food basket.*
- **They funded online educational platforms aimed at helping children learn during quarantine,** dangerously blending marketing with educational information, and positioning these corporations as reliable sources of health-related information. *In the US, Lunchables, Frosted Flakes and McDonald’s Happy Meals advertised on ABCya’s online learning platform.*
- **They spun a health and wellbeing narrative publicly, while leveraging the pandemic as a way to**

delay healthy food policy. *In México, they attempted to use COVID-19 as an excuse to postpone implementing a new front-of-package warning label law.*

- **They promoted junk food as a tonic for tough times**, linking unhealthy food with appealing sentiments such as comfort, nostalgia, and family togetherness. *In Brazil, Burger King promoted its fast-food delivery service under the guise of helping people to stay safe at home.*
- **They linked their ultra-processed food and drinks with charitable causes**, helping consumers feel good about unhealthy purchases. *In the US, Coca-Cola partnered with Uber Eats to donate one meal to Feeding America for every order placed.*

These corporate interventions enabled Big Food to improve their image, strengthen their brands, ally with decisionmakers to gain political influence, and position their businesses as public-health partners during an emergency – even as they used these opportunities to advance their own unhealthy products.

Ultimately, the GHAI report underscores the urgent need for evidence-based healthy food policies and regulations, as well as stronger conflict-of-interest protocols, worldwide.

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About the Global Health Advocacy Incubator

The Global Health Advocacy Incubator is an international nongovernmental public-health organization that provides strategic support to advocates working to enact and implement laws designed to reduce disease and save lives.

Launched in 2014 by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, GHAI builds on the successes and lessons learned in the global fight against tobacco deaths, to strengthen advocacy capacity and improve public health around the world.

For more information, please visit AdvocacyIncubator.org.