

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

12:01 AM Eastern U.S. Time

November 17, 2020

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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 during COVID-19

WASHINGTON, D.C. *November 17, 2020* – 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 beverages high in unhealthy fats, sodium and added sugar were already contributing to rising rates of obesity, undernutrition, and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) prior to COVID-19 – used the pandemic to position themselves and their unhealthy products as essential and safe, putting those compromised populations, such as persons living with comorbidities, 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 examples of key ways in which “Big Food” exploited the coronavirus pandemic to their advantage:

- **They polished their public images with pandemic “solidarity actions,” offering questionable assistance 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 their products with health & safety during the pandemic.
- **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. *An online learning platform used by schoolchildren in the US featured junk food advertising,*

- **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 negatively affecting the short and long-term health of the population.

“The Caribbean is no exception. The Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) has been tracking this type of activity which was first shared in the NCD Alliance, Spectrum Consortium Report *Signaling Virtue, Promoting Harm – Unhealthy Commodities Industry and COVID-19* released in September 2020. There are many new examples from across the region featured in this GHAI report ranging from advertising energy drinks as cold remedies and high-sugar drinks as immune-boosters, to the use of fast-food and sugary beverage-branded online teaching materials targeting children,” said Maisha Hutton, HCC Executive Director. “Multiple major fast food chains across the Caribbean are leveraging the pandemic to build brand visibility, goodwill and loyalty by donating thousands of packages of ultra-processed foods to children, the elderly and health care workers despite widespread knowledge that obesity and NCDs exacerbate COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. This is an issue of rights and in this instance many of these actors are preying on the most vulnerable in a time of unique need.”

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food” (UN, 1948). COVID-19 is a public health emergency of international concern and has profoundly affected the nutrition and food security of people all around the world. In this context, it is important that this fundamental right of everyone for access to safe, nutritious and adequate food is preserved. Ultimately, the GHAI report underscores the urgent need for evidence-based healthy food policies and regulations, as well as stronger conflict-of-interest protocols, and guidelines for food donations during emergencies, worldwide.

“This is a wake-up call for governments to implement evidence-based public policies designed to create healthier food environments and to protect the right to adequate nutritious food,” said Sir Trevor Hassell, President of the HCC. “Such policies will help consumers make healthier nutritional choices during vulnerable times like these. The bottom line is, governments must prioritize public health above private interests and profits especially during times of crisis when vulnerabilities are exacerbated and the poor and marginalized are targeted. Safeguarding public health is an even more urgent priority if we are to ensure equity and protect the health and human rights of CARICOM citizens and rebuild a stronger and more resilient Caribbean.”

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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.