

"Obesity follows soda consumption like night follows day"

Published on NCD Alliance (<https://old.ncdalliance.org>)

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Submitted by ncd-admin on 10 March, 2016 - 12:50

Language English



© Nutritional Health Alliance, Mexico: The "12 spoonfuls of sugar" mass media campaign highlighted the amount of sugar in soda and linked soda consumption to diabetes.

Our title is borrowed from a recently published report titled ["Carbonating the World"](#) [1]. We would like to comment about our vision of what needs to be done to decrease the consumption of soda.

The report by [Center for Science in the Public Interest \(CSPI\)](#) [2] is a valuable tool for organizations and citizens committed to policy change at national level. The strategies described in the report are frighteningly similar to the tobacco industry tactics. The Big Corporation business logic behind it is: *once the market begins to shrink in developed countries, due to evidence of harms associated with the consumption of a given product, we reach out to new markets.*

One of the things that people learn in a training course for lobbying (governmental relations) designed for corporations (there are many of those nowadays), is that the role of a lobbyist is to monitor closely policies that can impact the business through developing relationships with government officials. The most feared actions that can impact a business are taxation and regulation. This may sound as an oversimplification of complex social relations and power struggles within societies, but it certainly applies to the businesses that interest us due to being involved in the field of NCD risk factors.

7 recommendations for beverage companies

To expand on the role of the business sector in the obesity epidemic, today we want to emphasize and comment on the seven recommendations listed by the report, aiming at beverage companies:

- 1. Acknowledge that heavy consumption of full calorie products contributes to obesity and other health related problems.** *For instance stop funding scientists and health organizations to divert the debate by claiming that it is all a matter of physical activity without full disclosure of conflict of interest issues*

2. **Stop all forms of marketing that are intended or likely to influence children under 12.** *The real life example that we have from Brazil is that lobbyists from beverage and other ultra-processed products industry fought heavily and successfully against a bill that would restrict marketing of harmful products for children 0-6 years old. Since 1990, it is prohibited in Brazil any kind of marketing targeted to children, but the same lobbyists pressure the government to avoid the enforcement of this legislation. This is so outrageous that no further comment is needed.*
3. **Reduce container sizes** *to assist individuals manage portion control.*
4. **Reduce the calorie content of drinks to no more than 40 calories per 355 ml (12 oz.).** *Sell less sweet drinks or using non-caloric sweeteners.*
5. **Include a notice on containers disclosing adverse health effects.** *Actually, if they started just by not putting cartoon characters in their products that would be a great thing ([see here](#)) [3]. Here, the industry lobby again is trying to push back the labeling regulations, but Latin America is moving forward.*
6. **Stop opposing governmental measures aimed at reducing the harm from sugar drinks.** *This is likely the most important recommendation of them all, beverage companies need to show some coherence between what it is said by its corporate social responsibility staff and what it actually does through its governmental relations department. Economic arguments are the ones used to avoid regulations, which is very typical when you don't have an argument on the merits of the issue. Actually, this is one of the things that we learn in the lobby training: "use economic arguments to defend the companies' position".*
7. **Discontinue advertising and indirect promotions of caloric beverages.** *This is also one of the fundamentals. Non-caloric beverages shouldn't be promoted either, as they can cause impacts on the obesity epidemic as well.*

It would be truly fantastic if the companies followed those recommendations. But what we are seeing in Brazil are efforts to move towards doubtfully effective self-regulation. Recommendations 3 and 4 are critical for urgent "damage control", as we are facing with huge volumes of SSBs being consumed every day in our country, but these two priority actions won't solve the problem alone.

Scrutinising self-regulation

In a meeting held in São Paulo a few weeks ago with a group of NGOs, ranging from consumer's to children's rights and health promotion, the [Brazilian Association of Beverage](#) [4] companies presented a plan with the intention to adopt self-regulation to stop selling sodas in schools. They want to be a part of the obesity challenge solution. Sounds very good, but it does not survive closer scrutiny. For example, the supply of beverages with added sugars to most schools are done through third party distributors (this information was disclosed by them) so companies cannot control the schools that buy their supply from third parties. In that case, for the measure to have efficacy, the most intelligent way to do it would be to support regulation aimed at schools. But, when asked about that possibility, the company said that regulation was not a good solution (this matches with what we learn in the lobby training, "say no" to regulation is the default). Food for thought! The argument against it was that the Brazilian government is too busy with the Zika epidemics and they did not want to overload the government (no further comments needed).

If we are serious about tackling the obesity epidemic, we need to change the rules of the game for beverage companies.

In a nutshell, if we really want to be serious about tackling the obesity epidemics caused by the consumption of sugar drinks, we perhaps need to discuss ways of changing the rules of the game. Beverage companies of open capital have an obligation to generate profits for its shareholders. As it is today, it is incredibly profitable to sell a product that costs not much to be produced, has some of its ingredients heavily subsidized (HFSC), and that does not pay for the harmful consequences it generates. When these companies begin to pay for the externalities of their business model, something will have to change.

In the meantime, we will play our role and keep aiming at regulatory policies that will reduce soda consumption and protect people's health, while beverage companies will pretend that they want to profit less.

If drink companies had to pay for externalities of their business model things would have to change

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Idec is a non-profit NGO that fights for consumers rights in Brazil since 1987, independently from companies and political parties. Supported by its members, Idec aims to promote, protect and guarantee the access to healthy and sustainable foods for all.

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[1] https://ncdalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/carbonatingreport.pdf

[2] <http://www.cspinet.org>

[3] <http://abir.org.br/pepsi-vai-colocar-emojis-nas-embalagens/>

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