

What one woman endures to tell truth to power: when interference meddles dangerously with fact

Submitted by ncd-admin on 12 August, 2019 - 15:00

Language English



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Photojournalist and health communications expert Analía Lorenzo highlights industry interference in public health policies and shares the case of Dr. Esperanza Cerón Villaquirán versus Coca-Cola shareholders.

Dr. Esperanza Cerón Villaquirán is a health activist known in the Latin American region for her dedicated work to improve the food and habits of her community in Colombia, and to openly confront the massive soft drink and junk food industry.

I met Esperanza years ago, after she received a series of threats for a campaign that her organisation, [Educar Consumidores](#) [1] (Educate Consumers), launched to prevent the population, particularly children, from suffering the damage caused by excessive consumption of sugary drinks. In this case, the soft drink industry did not hesitate to use all possible strategies, not only putting lobbyists in the Colombian Congress but also using telephone interventions, death threats and intimidation against Esperanza and her team to silence their voices. An article about this story in the prestigious [New York Times newspaper](#) [2] was one of the few endorsements the activist had in those dark times.

Civil society vs. shareholders

In March of this year, I again had the opportunity to talk with Esperanza about the industry's interference in public health policies and their effects. This time it followed an invitation that the doctor received from a friendly organisation, [Corporate Accountability International](#) [3] (CAI), to participate as a representative in a civil society meeting within the Coca-Cola shareholders meeting at the Museum of Coca-Cola in Atlanta.

In a remarkable effort, CAI got the shareholders to invite some of Latin America's social leaders to a meeting with the soft drink shareholders. Present were Jaime Delgado of [ASPEC](#) [4] (Peruvian Association of Consumers), Rebecca Berner of the [Poder del Consumidor de México](#) [5] (Power of the Consumer of Mexico), and of course, CAI representatives as the promoters of the initiative and Esperanza, for Educar Consumidores. However, the group of

defenders suffered great pressure not to participate in confronting the shareholders, who expressly requested that Esperanza not speak.

"It was very strange and raised the idea that Coca-Cola is afraid to respond to civil society in front of those shareholders who may be beginning to wonder if all the complaints weighing on the brand are true," said Esperanza. "The vast majority of shareholders do not care about anything other than receiving dividends; in general, they believe the reports that the company directors give them, in which they state that they are responsible when it comes to the environment, to life, and that they are worried about the obesity pandemic."

Denial as a corporate strategy

Far from being receptive to the impact and obvious and proven interference of the soft drink in terms of public health worldwide, Coca-Cola executives became defensive, denying Latin American public health experts like Esperanza the opportunity to express their concerns on the premises. Esperanza sums it up: "My comment was focused on health impacts, especially on children and young people who are their main sales target. I saw many shareholders, all vulnerable to the effects of unhealthy diets high in sugar, maybe listening to this issue, who could make someone ask some questions about it. Coca-Cola fears losing its brand prestige and that is why it fears the truth. They know that they will not be able to hide the scientific evidence, as the tobacco industry did for years, for much longer."

There is a very small number of shareholders who have begun to question the company, but requests for specific reports on complaints against the company - ranging from employee abuse, racism, pollution, and animal testing to their contribution to the obesity epidemic - such as that made by associate [John C. Harrington](#) [6], who has one hundred common shares in the company, are systematically rejected while the company self-justifies with private reports that it finances itself. "If you look at the report (Proxy) to the shareholders, beautifully edited, it is a manifesto of success and lies. That report says, for example, that they return all of the water they consume in the communities, something physically and technically impossible; and besides that, the water they return is contaminated," says the activist.

Come together in defence of public health

The interference of these industries in national public health policies is clear. They interfere with various strategies: they put pressure on governments; buy academics, political decision makers and the media; and involve themselves in international trade agreements to rise above the internal legislation of different countries. "Strategies that tread on corruption," says Esperanza, according to her own experience. "The independent academy, civil society, and decision makers that value public health over private interests must come together in defence of public health."

Nothing discourages Esperanza Cerón Villaquirán, who continues her decades-long struggle in spite of all barriers. "Today, we are following the recommendations of the Pan-American Health Organization: fighting for the consumption tax; for front of pack food labelling with health warnings; for the prohibition of advertising, promotion and sponsorship aimed at children and adolescents. We fight so that school environments are not obesogenic; and also for the promotion of physical activity." Esperanza's efforts are not futile - she continues to ensure that the experience with Coca-Cola last March was successful, - the campaign has contributed to supporting of a [resolution](#) [7] that requires a report - with an independent review - of how Coca-Cola's sugary products and its advertising aimed at children are damaging public health.

There is no doubt that Esperanza Cerón Villaquirán's tenacity, persistence and resilience to tell truth to power set a gold standard for public health advocates.

About Esperanza Cerón Villaquirán

Dr. Esperanza Cerón Villaquirán, is a surgeon from the University of Cauca; a Health and Environment Specialist at El Bosque University; an expert in Alternative Therapies at El Rosario University; holds a PhD in Education from La Salle University - Costa Rica; and is Director of EDUCAR CONSUMIDORES and CAORDIA in Colombia.

About the author

[Analía Lorenzo](#) [8] has a Degree in Communication Sciences from the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She has been a photojournalist for more than 20 years. She currently lives in Mexico City, where she has been specialising in health, gender and human rights issues. Her work as a journalist and for NGOs has enabled her to cover humanitarian crises (mainly in Latin America, although she has also studied African contexts) and design communication strategies based on international analysis.

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[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/health/colombia-soda-tax-obesity.html>

[3] <https://www.corporateaccountability.org/>

[4] <https://www.aspec.org.pe/>

[5] <https://elpoderdelconsumidor.org/>

[6] <https://www.corporateaccountability.org/media/press-release-harrington-investments-asks-coca-cola-for-a-study-on-sugar-and-public-health/>

[7] http://www.envisionreports.com/coca-cola3/2019/proxy/HTML1/coca-cola-proxy2019_0095.htm

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