

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The challenge of responding to COVID-19 has given rise to exceptional mobilisation, innovation and action across all sectors of society. Governments around the world have taken unprecedented steps to address the health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic; while businesses, charities and community groups have sought to respond to the crisis both independently and as part of collective initiatives.

Alongside recognising the contribution of many private sector actors to the COVID-19 response, it is important to consider the unintended or indirect harms that may arise from the involvement of unhealthy commodity industries. Leading producers of alcohol, fossil fuels, infant formula, tobacco and ultra-processed food and drink products have engaged extensively with the pandemic. NCD Alliance and the SPECTRUM research consortium are collaborating in an initiative examining the extent and implications of such corporate initiatives for health and sustainable development.

This report offers a preliminary analysis of results from a crowdsourcing project involving health advocates, researchers and policy experts in the task of mapping unhealthy commodity industry actions around the world. Respondents to an online survey contributed 786 submissions describing such activities in over 90 countries. The report outlines four broad categories of strategic responses evident in multiple countries and across diverse industries:

Adapting marketing and promotion of product

Companies rapidly adapted their marketing efforts to reference health and social concerns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. A common tactic was to link products with the efforts of health professionals, emergency services and other front-line workers via donations. Promotions invoked combating the epidemic within advertising themes, and exploited social distancing and the new prominence of facemasks in marketing. There have also been clear signs that the response to COVID-19 is accelerating trends in marketing around digitisation, livestreaming, e-commerce and increasing availability of products via new online platforms.

Corporate social responsibility and philanthropy

Mapping responses to COVID-19 highlights how unhealthy commodity industries have extensively used philanthropic and social responsibility initiatives to progress long-standing strategic priorities. These have been advanced via efforts to build support among key communities; purporting to address supply shortages and contribute to health system strengthening; prominent donations to national and international funding efforts; and appearing to offer creative solutions that enhance management of reputational risk to the companies involved.

Pursing partnerships and collaborations

Unhealthy commodity industries have also sought to advance strategic objectives through extensive collaborations. Nationally, these have included donations via partnerships with government ministries, hospitals and health agencies, as well as with key third sector service providers. Unhealthy commodity industries have also sought to link with leading international organisations and NGOs, and have widely depicted themselves as partners in global health and development

Shaping policy environments

COVID-19 has provided unhealthy commodity industries with scope to advance preferred policy positions, particularly as governments struggle to reconcile health objectives with economic and trade imperatives. Key activities have included lobbying to have unhealthy commodities designated as 'essential' products; petitioning to accelerate the easing of lockdown; working to undermine health and environmental regulations; and attempting to shape strategies for economic recovery.

In summary, submissions from around the world indicate an extraordinary range and scale of responses to COVID-19 from unhealthy commodity industries, reflecting extensive efforts on the part of these industries to be viewed as contributing to the pandemic response. These activities serve to promote these industries' core interests by promoting products, enhancing reputations, and building political influence. Collectively, the actions outlined in this report raise concerns about the prospect of a *corporate capture of COVID-19* in which the involvement of unhealthy commodity industries in the pandemic response risks directing public policy efforts away from broader health and social goals and towards the entrenchment of industry interests. This highlights the importance of continuing to monitor their corporate political activity around COVID-19 if the potential to build back better is to be realised.

Please contribute to this effort!

We invite you to join us in gathering further examples by keeping an eye out for unhealthy commodity industry actions, activities, communications and behaviours that strike you as interesting, curious and/or concerning. When you see them, please add them to the database via the following link:

bit.ly/NCDA_SPECTRUM_MAPPING_TOOL

INTRODUCTION

The sheer scale of the health, social, and economic impacts of COVID-19 has triggered unprecedented multi-sectoral responses across governments, international organisations, philanthropies, civil society organisations, and the commercial sector. The scale of the emergency response and associated resource challenges has resulted in health actors actively encouraging private sector actors to contribute to public and community efforts to counter the effects of the pandemic. This imperative is reflected in the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) issuing “an unprecedented private sector call to action to tackle COVID-19”, asserting that “all businesses have a key role to play in minimising the likelihood of transmission and impact on society.” (WHO and ICC 2020)

COVID-19 has given rise to an extraordinary range of responses from both public and private sectors. Governments around the world have taken unprecedented steps to address the health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic; while businesses, charities and community groups have sought to respond to the crisis both independently and as part of collective initiatives. In many respects, 2020 has witnessed exceptional mobilisation, innovation and action across all sectors of society as part of a collective effort to meet the challenges posed by a global pandemic.

An unreflective emphasis on multi-sectoral mobilisation can, however, risk overlooking potential unintended consequences, indirect harms, and conflicts of interest that may arise from the actions of some commercial sector actors. In particular, the involvement of businesses whose core products and activities are harmful to health risks

exacerbating burdens of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and potentially undermining broader development goals. Viewed from a commercial determinants of health perspective, (Lee and Freudenberg 2020; McKee and Stuckler 2018) initiatives that such corporations proclaim as positive contributions to the COVID-19 response at national and international levels could provide new marketing and promotional opportunities, secure access to and build goodwill among political elites, and create opportunities to influence public policy and re-shape health and development agendas.

NCDs including cardiovascular disease, cancer, stroke, dementia, respiratory diseases, diabetes and mental health conditions, are responsible for forty-one million deaths annually, seventeen million of which occur in people under the age of seventy. (WHO, 2018) Alcohol and tobacco use, and unhealthy diets increase the risk of developing NCDs, risk factors which are associated with industries with corporate interests in these commodities. With the Political Declaration of the 2018 UN High Level Meeting on NCDs formally integrating mental health conditions and air pollution into the global NCD agenda, (United Nations, 2018) attention is also turning to the contribution air pollution from fossil fuels to NCDs, (Watts et al, 2019) and of problem gambling and other addictions to mental health conditions including depression and suicide (van Schalkwyk et al, 2019; Goyder et al, 2019).

In a context of increasing advocacy and academic interest, the NCD Alliance and the SPECTRUM research consortium combined to launch a crowdsourcing initiative mapping how unhealthy commodity industries (Moodie et al 2013) have been responding to the pandemic. Using an online tool disseminated across NCD Alliance’s network and via linked advocacy and academic communities, this project allowed respondents to identify and submit private sector initiatives relating to COVID-19 from a diverse range of health relevant industries and from local grassroots to global levels. As well as reporting these initiatives, participants had the opportunity to express any opinions or concerns they had regarding specific corporate activities.

This report provides an initial depiction of the scale and scope of responses identified. This represents a first opportunity to feedback to the many individuals and organisations who have contributed to this effort, and provides a preliminary account of our analysis of the implications of corporate engagement with COVID-19 for health governance.

Our approach to mapping industry responses

In utilising a crowdsourcing methodology (Brabham et al 2014), this project aimed to draw on the knowledge, expertise and interest of advocacy and research colleagues around the world to increase awareness and understanding of how unhealthy commodity industries have responded to COVID-19. Using an internet-based tool (in this case the survey software package Qualtrics), our knowledge discovery and management approach (Brabham 2012) asked colleagues to contribute to developing a global database of unhealthy commodity industry initiatives.

A short survey asked contributors to provide brief details of any COVID-related industry activities that they had observed since 30th January 2020, when WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The tool sought to collect information across:

- Geographical context – whether global, regional or country level
- The industry (or industries) involved
- Themes of corporate behaviour or activity
- Description and a brief account of the initiative, promotion or report, and a link or url to source material
- Any specific issues or concerns that respondents wanted to highlight.

Details of the initiative were distributed to NCDCA members, via SPECTRUM and related networks and via social media from 5th May 2020. Data were collected over 10 weeks to a closing date of 17th July. The survey was available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese versions. Contributors were encouraged to engage with the survey on a repeated basis and to make multiple submissions as they monitored industry conduct.

Following removal of submissions without substantiating data, the crowdsourcing initiative produced a total of **786 responses**. In addition to its size, this dataset was also geographically diverse, with industry activities reported in 94 countries. 675 responses identified industry actions at country level, of which 50 referred to activities in multiple countries. The most frequently cited countries were the **United Kingdom** and **United States of America** (each reported in 119 submissions), followed by **Australia** (56), **India**, (43), **Mexico** (34), **Brazil** (29) and **Jamaica** (28). 60 responses identified actions at regional level, around half of which referred to Europe, while 101 described the level of activity as global (most of which referred to broader initiatives and reports from transnational corporations or associated foundations).

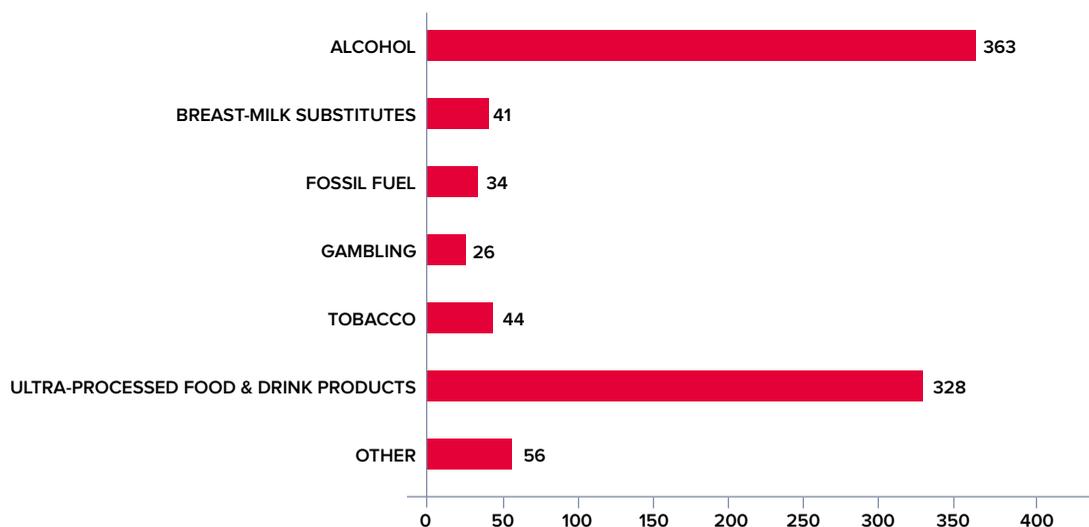


Table 1: Commercial sector responses identified by respondents (by industry category)

INTRODUCTION

In order to develop a wide-ranging understanding of health-relevant corporate responses to the pandemic, and to engage diverse health policy communities, respondents were asked to report on actions across a broad range of industries, listing industries widely understood as contributing to NCD risk factors with an additional option for respondents to identify others via free text. A large majority of the responses concerned activities of the **alcohol industry** and manufacturers of **ultra-processed food and drink products** (363 and 328 respectively), though the data set also includes notable submissions across breast-milk substitutes, fossil fuel, gambling and tobacco. Respondents were also able to report on other industries via free text, and the majority of these 56 submissions concerned either other aspects of the broader food industry (such as dairy or meat production) or the cannabis/marijuana industry (14). Of the 786 submissions, 77 reported activities by more than one industry.

The dataset highlights the diverse ways in which unhealthy commodity industries have engaged with the pandemic. Such ways of engaging have included directly commercial activities (most notably around new marketing initiatives and adapting promotions to the rapidly changing policy and trading context), ostensibly philanthropic activities, and activities in more strategic and political spheres. Respondents were able to align their reported examples with up to eight broad and inter-linked areas of corporate political activity (Hillman et al 2004; Hancock et al 2018; Mialon and da Silva Gomes 2019), again with space provided for free text comments or descriptions of other activities.

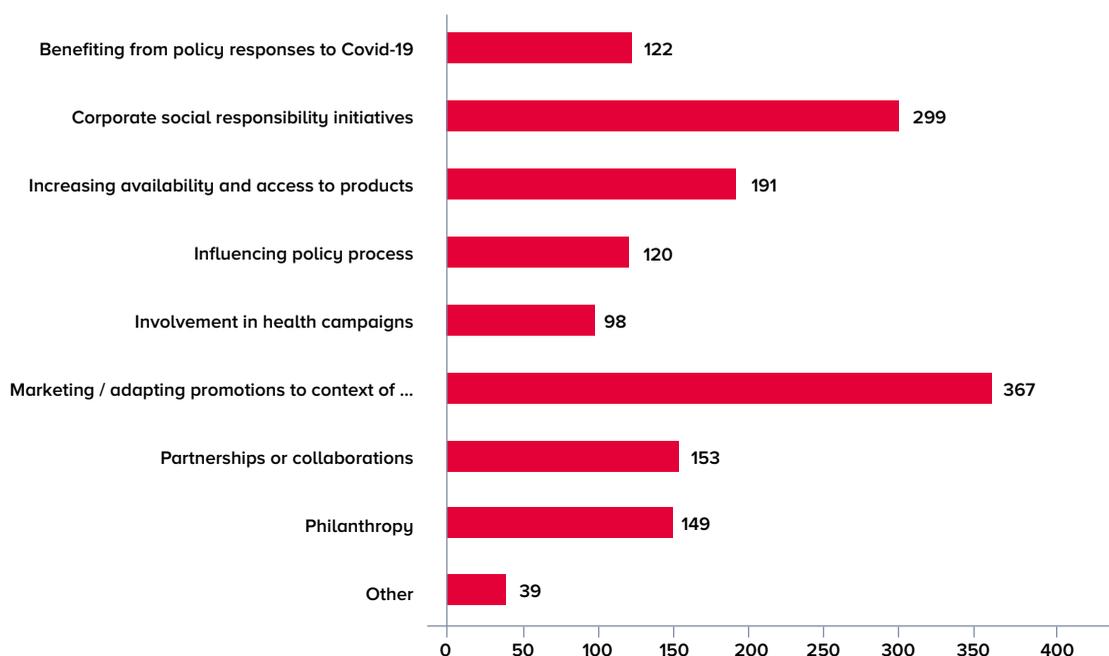


Table 2: Unhealthy commodity industry activities identified by respondents (by category)

Using this report

This report is structured to allow readers to engage fully with the results of this crowdsourcing initiative. Each example of commercial sector conduct presented here provides a link to a source based in a submission to the survey, with many of the examples also corresponding to a location on a **global map of industry responses**, with access to further information. The map is organised around the categories of industry and of corporate political activity addressed by the survey. The map is intended as a living document; it currently provides details of many of the examples reported here, and our intention is to continue to populate this map to provide increased access to the data compiled by contributors around the world.

All of the examples presented here are rooted in submissions made to the survey by these respondents. Our analysis of this unique data set is also informed by additional information generated by the research team through iterative snowball searching across websites and materials produced by corporations, trade associations and business-interest NGOs, industry analyst reports, trade press and news media.

This report is necessarily preliminary given the timescales involved. It is organised around four broad categories of strategic responses evident in multiple countries and across diverse industries, each of which raise important questions for global health and development:

- Adapting marketing and promotions, increasing availability
- Corporate social responsibility and philanthropy
- Pursuing partnerships, coveting collaboration
- Shaping policy environments

It is important to note that our approach does not assume that every activity, event, donation or partnership reported here is unambiguously problematic from a public health perspective. We recognise, for example, that many of the activities reported here will have provided invaluable funding for much-needed interventions by governments, civil society and international organisations in the context of urgent needs to act amid rapidly escalating losses in revenue and capacity. From a systems perspective, however, it is important to critically evaluate broader implications beyond the immediate and direct impacts

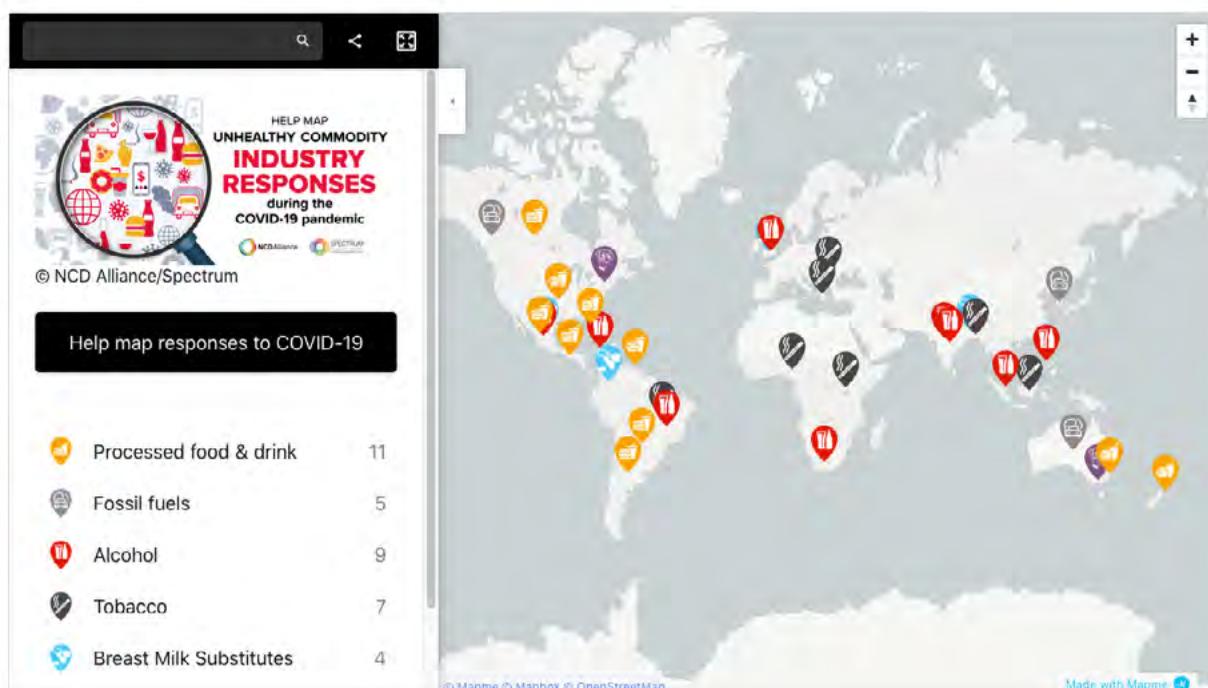


Figure 1. Map of examples of unhealthy commodity industry responses to the pandemic

of such corporate philanthropy or social responsibility initiatives. Our focus in this report is on examining how unhealthy commodity industries have sought strategic advantage via ostensibly philanthropic donations, rather than to critique the actions of recipients of such funding. And while there are clearly broad consistencies in the strategic ways in which different unhealthy commodity industries have been responding across very different political and economic contexts, there is no suggestion here that all industries are doing exactly the same things in every country. There are important contextual and strategic differences that will continue to be explored in ongoing analyses and in future publications.

Most importantly, this project is far from finished. It is clear that unhealthy commodity industries will continue to adapt their engagement with COVID-19 as the pandemic, policy responses and economic crisis evolve. It is important that health researchers and advocates continue to map those activities, understand their significance and implications, and be able to inform the development of effective and coherence health policies around the world.

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CHAPTER I

ADAPTING MARKETING AND PROMOTIONS TO LEVERAGE THE PANDEMIC

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive changes in retail, employment and social environments, confronting businesses – including unhealthy commodity industries – with enormous financial and supply chain challenges. But it is equally apparent that leading tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed food and drink producers are highly resilient in times of crises. As the CEO of Coca-Cola recently told investors, in “every previous crisis, military, economic or pandemic, in the last 134 years, the Coke Company has come out stronger.”

Such resilience reflects the ability of such corporations to adapt quickly and exploit new opportunities. In the context of COVID-19, this is illustrated via the pivoting of marketing and promotions to leverage both the pandemic and associated policy responses. For example, snack manufacturers **Mondelēz** quickly recognised how lockdown led to increased in-house consumption whereby “more grazing, more continuous eating, and snacking takes up a much bigger role.” Other companies used the COVID-19 crisis to accelerate strategic changes in their marketing, promotion and distribution – as in the case of Latin American brewing giant **AmBev**, which spoke of “achieving in two months what was supposed to be done in two years” in promoting its Brahma Duplo Malte brand in **Brazil**.

1. Putting a halo on unhealthy commodities: Appropriating front line workers

A striking theme across the submissions is the frequency with which unhealthy commodity industries sought to link their products with the work of health professionals, emergency services and other front line workers during the pandemic.

In the **United States**, burger chain **McDonald's** “Lovin' Southeast Missouri” campaign offered healthcare workers a free ‘thank you meal’ if they shared a selfie of themselves with the meal; for each selfie received, the franchise promised a meal coupon to the local food bank. **Heineken Russia** donated meals together with its energy drink – Solar Power – for doctors and nurses on night shift, while **Red Bull Australia** were thanked on social media by Lifeline Adelaide for the ‘surprise

delivery [of energy drinks] to help keep our Crisis Supporters energised as they answer calls for support’.

The international donut company **Krispy Kreme** similarly leveraged COVID-19 in a marketing campaign purportedly ‘serving smiles’ by offering free donuts to healthcare and other frontline workers in **New Zealand**, the **US** and the **UK**. Staff at the Royal Free Hospital in London posted a thank you message on social media to which Krispy Kreme responded, citing #NHSheroes and suggesting the brand was responsible for #creatingsmiles and #servingsmiles.



Figure 2. Royalfreelondon thank Krispy Kreme UK / Twitter

& beverage workers as critical frontline heroes, telling consumers they were “[#HereForYou](#), showing extraordinary strength and dedication every day”. In similar vein, **Kraft Heinz** used a [video of ‘everyday heroes’](#) in their processed food supply chain emoting ‘We Got You **America**’ while visibly promoting core products such as Heinz Tomato Ketchup. In **India**, potato chip brand **Lay’s** [#Heartwork campaign](#) was an emotional ode to “[each hero in the supply chain who works relentlessly against all odds to ensure Lay’s brings joy to millions across the country](#)”. Lay’s [engaged social influencers](#) to raise the profile of the [#Heartwork](#) campaign, which also provided cross-promotion opportunities for other brands..

2. ‘Combatting the pandemic’ via marketing and promotions

As governments imposed lockdown restrictions, food manufacturers and retailers faced unprecedented challenges – including dramatic declines in eating out and a corresponding rush to stockpile groceries. Frozen food manufacturer **McCain** appealed to Canadian consumers to ‘[Eat More French Fries Canada!](#)’, linking increased consumption with a sense of civic duty in supporting farmers affected by the pandemic. In similar vein, fast food chain **Burger King** produced several COVID-19 inspired adaptations to its **US** marketing campaigns, including another example invoking patriotic duty by encouraging consumers to do their part by being “[Couch po-ta-riots](#)”. The company waived delivery fees on orders over \$10 to encourage people to ‘[Stay Home of the Whopper](#)’, and donated ¼ million burgers to nurses via the American Nurses Federation.

Oreo’s [#StayHomeStayPlayful campaign](#) ostensibly promoted both staying at home and good hygiene practices. As part of its ‘no hands’ [#CookieWithACause eating](#) challenge, the Mondelez-owned snack brand pledged to donate to Save the Children for each of the first 1 million challenge attempts uploaded on TikTok. In **Israel**, the [packaging of Elite chocolate’s ‘Keef-Kef’ bar](#) was re-designed to remove the word ‘Keef’ (‘high five’



Figure 6. Keef Kaf adapted its label to encourage social distancing / Ads Of Brands

in Hebrew) in a nod to social distancing. The newly-branded confectionery was promoted as ‘[The Israeli Chocolate Bar that’s Fighting the Corona Virus](#)’, with a [press release celebrating how “a small chocolate bar brand managed to raise the public’s awareness to the new hygiene guidelines.”](#)

In **Brazil**, brewer **Karsten** [created a graphic in the style of their logo](#) to resemble a pair of lungs – the main site of COVID-19 infection - and attaching the slogan “*Good beer is like air: you can’t live without it*” while encouraging consumers to follow 3 key tips to survive with Karsten - *isolate, use sanitiser and drink beer for fun*.

“Unhealthy commodity industries have taken advantage of an adverse environment to sell their products and improve their image in the eyes of consumers. For example, brewer Karsten’s slogan “Good beer is like air: you can’t live without it.” Civil society has an important role to play monitoring, disseminating and dismantling certain actions of corporate sectors that cause negative externalities.”

Paula Johns, Director General, ACT Health Promotion, Brazil



Figure 7. Karsten / Facebook

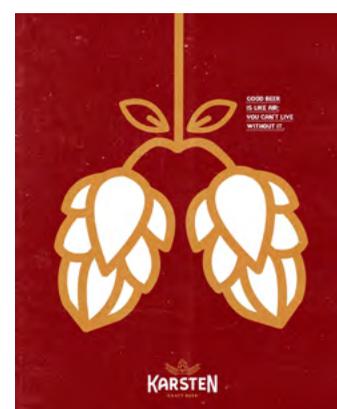


Figure 8. Karsten Brewery / AdsoftheWorld

COVID-19 was also invoked by unhealthy commodity industries claiming to have suspended their marketing activities in order to focus on philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (a claim that rather belies its own inherent promotional function). One prominent exponent was **Coca-Cola**, which was depicted as having **“suspended all commercial advertising of its brands and deploying its marketing and trade assets, including social media channels, product labels and point-of-sale materials, to amplify COVID-19 messaging”** in Africa. The company continued to develop and disseminate audio visual promotional material, including an **emotive video** of families cooking and eating together (and drinking Coke) in apparent celebration of people staying **“close to home”** during the pandemic. In **North America, Anheuser-Busch** (a subsidiary of AB InBev) similarly publicised its decision to redirect its sport and entertainment investment to support non-profit organizations. Their Budweiser **‘One Team’ advertisement** draws heavily on the everyday heroes narrative to associate the brand with health and other frontline workers.



Figure 9. Dos Equis six-foot cooler / Forbes



Figure 10. Bacardi snapchat social distancing lens

3. Selling social distancing, commodifying PPE

Unhealthy commodity industries have sought to leverage opportunities associated with the distinctive social and economic context of the pandemic, with product promotions exploiting a focus on social distancing, utilising face masks as advertising space, and inserting brand images into online video communication platforms.

In **Germany**, a promotions stunt by **Burger King** centred on large paper **‘social-distance crowns’**, employing the chain’s signature logo on wide-brimmed hats to keep customers six feet away from each other as restaurants reopened. Variations on this promotion included **US** beer company **Dos Equis** six-foot ‘Social Distancing Cooler’ to ‘help you drink responsibly’, and **Bud-Light’s** teaser **six-foot slab pack of 72 beers**. **Bacardi developed a snapchat lens** to encourage social distancing in re-opened bars, with users of the app shown a Caribbean island when at a safe distance, or a red screen if they came within a meter of another person.

The increasing use of face masks has also provided unhealthy commodity industries with significant promotional opportunities. One early exponent was a **Subway fast-food franchise** in **Canada** which offered a free facemask with every two sandwiches purchased in a deal advertised as a great way to ‘protect you and your kids’. **Accra Brewery donated** brightly patterned re-usable facemasks to bar staff in **Ghana** in support of alcohol retailers. In **India**, the beer brand **Bira** had already been producing **branded facemasks** used to protect from air pollution - which it re-marketed during the pandemic; while **Budweiser Streetwear Co** launched a ‘fashion forward’ **branded face-mask** designed **to appeal**



Figure 11. Kingfisher wallpapers for virtual meetings / Facebook

to Indian Millennials. In the **United States**, Dunkin Donuts developed their five **'sweet' face mask designs** for customers to purchase in support of the company's *Dunkin' Joy in Childhood Foundation*. **Italian** vodka brand **Keglevich** partnered with Milanese street artists to design face masks which the company distributed to bar staff in order to instil **"a joyful and positive spirit"**.

The newfound prominence of online video platforms such as Zoom created new virtual 'billboard' opportunities. Processed food and beverage companies such as **McDonald's (in New Zealand)** and **DrPepper (in the US)** created **branded virtual backgrounds for free download**. In **India**, **Kingfisher** beer created a set of "Good Times" **wallpaper** backgrounds as part of its **"Divided by screens, united by Kingfisher"** campaign. Beer-producer **Carlsberg** tapped into growing fatigue with teleconferencing in its promoted **social media posts** **"Actually excited to find yourself offline? Probably. Thanks Zoom. Ta Houseparty. Cheers Kahoot. we'll take it from here."**

"The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of people living with NCDs to COVID-19 related complications. The unhealthy commodities industries have even managed to plot misleading marketing strategies during a global public health emergency, challenging healthy behaviours and health promoting policies. It is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders to shield vulnerable citizens from these misleading tactics and work smartly to Build Back Better."

Ms. Prachi Kathuria, Co-ordinator, Healthy India Alliance-India NCD Alliance

4. Accelerating digitalisation, increasing availability

Alongside the tactical approaches outlined above, unhealthy commodity industries used the changing social and economic context of lockdown to drive strategic changes in the marketing, promotion and distribution of their products. The head of alcohol industry trade association **SpiritsEurope** highlighted how the crisis led to **accelerated trends in digitisation**, boosting e-commerce and placing a new emphasis on virtual interaction. Coca-Cola's Chief Financial Officer **attributed the brand's accelerated move into e-commerce** to the COVID-19 pandemic propelling consumers into the digital space, saying *"I think that this period will prove to be an inflection point for [e-commerce] to become a much larger part in a shorter period of time."* As social

distancing restrictions began to impact on conventional marketing channels, beer producer **AmBev** sought to engage with the Brazilian consumers by sponsoring a popular livestreaming **concert series** which enabled it to promote key brands such as Brahma Duplo Malte, Bohemia and Budweiser. The company later reported that this platform had "375 million views so far breaking all viewing records possible. **We had 24 times more earned media impressions than [for the] FIFA World Cup in 2018.**" Heineken **Asia** looked to increase its marketing efforts via digital, social and TV platforms, with the expectation that **"Digitalization is going to stay and progress further"** even after lockdown measures were relaxed.

Several companies used online media to leverage promotional opportunities from the additional time consumers were spending on their phones. In the **Philippines**, **KFC** and **Nintedo** joined forces to blend popular game **Animal Crossing** with fast food and social media. Players visited a virtual KFC restaurant, and could win real KFC give-aways by finding the brand's embedded mascot Colonel Sanders. In the **US**, fastfood chain **Burger King** awarded give-away products to those **who caught a QR-code moving around TV screens**; while in **Brazil**, the company launched an attempt to "be present in Brazilian people's daily lives" while purportedly 'doing their bit' to support social distancing; this involved asking **users to agree to be monitored using geolocation tool** (users found to stay indoors the longest were eligible to receive a free "Lockdown Whopper").

In another campaign encouraging consumers to stay at home, **Romania's** branch of **Milka** Chocolates recruited young social media and YouTube followers into a **virtual easter egg hunt** -hosted via popular online game Fortnite – in which players competed to find hidden eggs. In **China**, infant formula brand **Illuma** (owned by Wyeth Nutrition), positioned themselves as helping desperate parents to fill educational voids with young children locked out of classrooms and child care. **Wyeth Nutrition** saw an opportunity to help children pass the time and continue their education in an engaging way, creating the **Voice Doodler**—an app that lets children create digital story illustrations using only their voice."



Figure 12. Animal Crossing collaborates with KFC Philippines / cnet



Figure 13. Milka and Fortnite had virtual easter egg hunt / Muse by Clio

Pepsico in the **US** **launched two new direct-to-consumer websites** facilitating online sales, with free delivery on orders of \$15 or more. **AB InBev** in created **Tienda Cerca**, a free online platform enabling people in **Ecuador, Peru and Colombia** to order and receive home delivery of items from neighbourhood stores - a service purportedly “praised by the President of Ecuador, Lenin Moreno”. Similarly, the introduction of lockdown restrictions saw rapid promotion of online wine sales in the **UK** via the **Get Wine App**. In **Sweden**, spirits giant The Absolut Company initiated a new front organisation for **private “Farm Sales” of alcohol**. When lockdown shut alcohol shops in **India**, **special permissions** were granted to alcohol retailers to increase availability of alcohol through new delivery provisions (in a legislative environment which otherwise restricts e-commerce and home delivery).

Breast milk substitute manufacturers were among **those leveraging e-commerce** to exploit the concerns of parents, with **Mead Johnson** testing messaging for targeted marketing through **Chinese** news and information app **Toutiao**. Such messages played into mothers’ fears about infants’ safety and focused on the product providing protection, or promoted free home delivery of formula products to avoid the need to go out into a newly threatening world. Formula brand **Friso China** similarly focused on addressing parents’ anxieties about running out of ‘nutrition products’, emphasising the benefits of customers registering with the company to access e-commerce discount coupons.



Figure 14. Natrumax Viet Nam on colostrum to boost babies’ immunity / Facebook

Formula for immunity?

Despite WHO, Unicef and national health agencies **stating** that breastfeeding is safe and strengthens babies’ immunity, infant formula and related industry stakeholders made **particularly prominent** efforts to exploit COVID-19 concerns in promoting their ultra-processed food products. Such efforts were buttressed by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control’s (CDC) National Institute for Nutrition and Health and the Chinese Medical Doctors’ Association, which – together with local companies - developed a set of **dairy consumption guidelines** suggesting that nutrients within milk could boost immunity and resilience to the novel coronavirus.

The alleged immune-boosting potential of milk formula was marketed in **several other countries within Asia**. In **Cambodia**, for example, infant formula company **Star Grow** **offered advice on what to do if your baby has a fever**; its cartoon panel featured **a child drinking milk with the ‘Star Grow’ brand in prominent position**. In **Viet Nam**, formula company **Natrumax** used messaging around combating coronavirus to promote its **colostrum-based** supplements and other fortified infant formulas, accompanied by images of babies wearing face masks alongside infant formula. Another Vietnamese company - **VitaDairy** - **used the widely recognised face** of **WHO Director General Dr Tedros** to promote its colostrum-based products, claiming its products were recommended by the Ministry of Health to boost immunity during the pandemic and noting they contained “natural IgG antibodies imported from the US”. The regional distributors of **RoyalAusNZ** infant formula products **promoted the virtues** of ingredients like lactoferrin



Figure 15. Colosbaby Vitadairy promotes colostrum as immune boosting / Facebook

with handles such as #carrythroughcovid #immune #healthsupplement, emphasising the Australian origin of their products as a source of reassurance.

Chinese and foreign infant formula manufacturers were reportedly encouraged to “**push hard on safety cues and messages**” following recent concerns around milk formula contamination. A spokesperson from a major seller of infant milk formula in **China**, **Feihe**, **described the pandemic** as an ‘opportunity’ for the brand. The infant formula manufacturer launched an **online medical consultation service**, offering customers free medical advice without having to leave their homes. Food giant **Danone** launched a similar initiative in **France** and the **UK** which it promoted with **ads** targeting concerned parents of babies ‘born into the pandemic’ which then directed parents to a ‘support and information’ site hosted by their Aptamil brand. Meanwhile - in **Mexico** - **Nestle**, **FEMSA** (the country’s Coca Cola bottler) and **YSA Pharmacies** breached the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes* by **offering to ‘gift’ formula** to vulnerable families for every can of infant or toddler milk purchased.

“The promotion of breast milk substitutes by Nestle, FEMSA and YSA Pharmacies not only breaches the Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, but illustrates the way many food and beverage companies have been utilizing the COVID-19 pandemic to position their products, generate a positive image for their brands and frame themselves as “part of the solution”, all at the risk of both compromising the health of young children and violating this internationally agreed Code”

Alejandro Calvillo, director of Mexican consumer NGO, El Poder del Consumidor]

Farmacias Yza
20 May · 🌐

Súmate a Farmacias YZA, Fundación FEMSA y Nestlé donando \$195 para apoyar con latas de leche a bebés y niños en comunidades vulnerables de Veracruz y el Sureste de México. La entrega en especie se realizará con el apoyo de Medical Mission Network México y Cáritas Veracruz.

Para mayor información, visita tu sucursal de Farmacias YZA más cercana <https://www.yza.mx/Sucursales/Busqueda>

Campaña del 15 de mayo al 16 de junio del 2020.

See translation

Por cada lata que se obtenga, Farmacias YZA, Fundación FEMSA y Nestlé donaremos 3 latas más*
*Latas en especie en latas de leche

¡Realiza tu donativo en caja o por transferencia!

Banco BBVA - Identificación: Farmacias SA de CV - Cuenta: 0792657864
Clabe: 01284001926578642 - Monto: \$195.00

Juntos podemos nutrir sus vidas

695

25 comments 230 shares

Figure 16. Farmacias Yza promote formula donation campaign / Facebook

CHAPTER II

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND PHILANTHROPY

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) – voluntary action that claims to act in the public interest through the prioritisation of wider social objectives rather than simply being profit-driven (Geiger and Cuzzocrea, 2017) – has emerged as a highly visible and strategically important dimension of corporate political activity in how unhealthy commodity industries are responding to COVID-19.

CSR initiatives are framed by corporate actors as an important part of the solution to a wide range of social issues, grounded in discourses of sustainable development, social responsibility, and corporate citizenship (Banerjee, 2008). However, unhealthy commodity industries employ CSR strategically as a tool to advance commercial and political interests (Babor and Robaina, 2013; Fooks et al., 2013; Fooks and Gilmore, 2013; Yoon and Lam, 2013; Tesler and Malone, 2008; Collin and Gilmore, 2002). This includes the strategic use of CSR as a tool to (i) build support within local communities (ii) secure legitimacy and enhance brand reputation (iii) effectively market products (iv) shape the policy agenda.

The mapping of CSR responses to COVID-19 highlights that unhealthy commodity industries have extensively used philanthropic and social responsibility initiatives as a corporate political strategy to build support in local communities and enhance brand reputation in wider society through addressing shortages and branded donations. In addition, CSR initiatives have performed a legitimating function in areas of reputational risk, such as single-use plastics and domestic violence.

1. Supporting communities to protect core interests

A broader category of corporate philanthropy relates to donations to support local communities, with a particular emphasis on the food and beverage sector. While donations and other forms of CSR promise to build legitimacy and support among communities, it is clear that CSR initiatives have a dual function in protecting core interests beyond their stated philanthropic purpose.

For example, **Heineken Asia Pacific's 'Support Our Streets'** aims to support the local food and beverage sector, with a combined contribution from **Heineken Malaysia** and **Asia Pacific Breweries Singapore** of USD 1.1million in cash funds and redeemable vouchers. In **Singapore**, consumers have been nudged by Tiger Beer to make a SGD 10 contribution to local food and beverage

retailers in return for redeemable 'digital drink vouchers'. The promotional website describes the brand as "standing in solidarity" and "rallying for help to support our local community" while "consumers stay off the streets as part of continued safe distancing measures". Similarly the '**Apoie Um Restaurante**' campaign in **Brazil** is framed as creating a social movement "which will help more establishments to go through this difficult time" by offering a 50% discount subsidised by **Ambev** breweries and **Nestlé**.



Figure 17. Chefs Club S/A. / #APOIUMRESTAURANTE

In **Ecuador**, **AB InBev** have created **Tienda Cerca** – a WhatsApp-based online food delivery service for closed neighbourhood stores that also functions as an online store for an **AB InBev** company. While the platform is described in public-facing materials as supporting 70,000 small businesses, the website prompts participating stores to purchase direct from the **Bavaria Brewer**.

The use of CSR initiatives to protect core interests is also evident in alcohol companies' support for the night-time economy. Promoted through the **French Embassy in South Africa's 'Keep The Spirit'** initiative offers a supplementary wage of R500 (R2 million in total) to "help alleviate the economic impact on members of the bar and restaurant community" for staff that sign-up to training materials about its premium brands. In **India**, the **AB InBev** brand **Budweiser** have partnered with the media brand **Mixmag** to livestream DJ sets, donating INR 1.5 lakhs per view to a non-governmental COVID-19 relief organisation for at-risk nightlife workers. **Diageo** has launched '**Raising the Bar**' to "supporting jobs and communities around the world" through USD.100million to support bars in **New York, São Paulo, Shanghai, Delhi** and **Kampala**. A **Diageo** press release emphasised the aim of the initiative to supply PPE and 'hygiene kits' to allow bars

to reopen. This priority is evident in the CSR initiatives of other alcohol companies, for example **AB InBev**, whose Cervejas de Mocambique (CDM) subsidiary has partnered with “[materials to assist bars and restaurants in adhering to preventive measures when they are allowed to reopen](#)”. In **Ghana**, the **AB InBev** company Accra Brewery donated 3,000 face masks to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture to support the hospitality sector, and in **Myanmar** 500 protective screens installed by **Heineken Asia Pacific** for off trade outlets.

The strategic use of CSR to build constituencies among local and national communities has also provided marketing opportunities to promote health damaging products, illustrated in the use of brands such as Tiger and CDM in promotional materials for CSR initiatives. The marketing potential of philanthropic donations was most overt in food industry donations of breast-milk substitute and sugar-sweetened beverages. In **Mexico**, for example, **FEMSA** – the giant Coca Cola bottling group and convenience store chain - and **Nestlé**, have pledged to donate packs of Nestlé breast-milk substitutes to vulnerable communities in Veracruz, with **FEMSA** also distributing unhealthy snacks and sugar sweetened beverages to families living in deprived neighbourhoods of Monterrey. Similarly, a donation of 3,000 packs of sugar sweetened beverages from **Coca Cola Ghana** provided a marketing opportunity with the Deputy Minister of Information being [interviewed](#) on a national news channel in front of a Coca-Cola branded screen.

2. Addressing shortages and health systems strengthening

A key component of CSR initiatives has been supporting health systems strengthening through strategic donations of medical devices and personal protective equipment (PPE). For unhealthy commodity industries, addressing shortages of medical supplies has created multiple opportunities to build constituencies with local communities and generate reputational benefits through high-profile donations to Ministries of Health and health agencies.

As part of its [Give Meals, Give Hope](#) project **PepsiCo India** and the **PepsiCo Foundation** have supported the WHO Collaborating Centre **Foundation for innovative New Diagnostics (FIND)** to procure and distribute 25,000 COVID-19 test kits in coordination with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. A press release from **FIND** welcomed this initiative from **PepsiCo India** “[to support the scale up of India’s COVID-19 testing capacity](#)” with the Head of Country Operations, Sanjay Sarin, describing the initiative as “[critical](#)” to scale up COVID-19 testing capacity. In **Paraguay**, Coca Cola donated personal protective equipment to the **National Institute of Respiratory Diseases**, including 22,000 surgical masks, 5,000 N95 respirators, and 2,000 surgical gowns. The **Ministry of Health** described **Coca Cola Paraguay** as having a “[desire to contribute to the](#)



Figures 18 a & b. Municipal leader thanks soda and snack brands for donations adriandelagarza / Twitter

strengthening of the health system and support the efforts of the National Government". In **Colombia**, **AB InBev** have donated **30,000 protective face shields** using recycled PET bottles, and **South African Breweries (SAB)** claims to have donated **100,000 face shields** made from recycled beer crates to a sub-national health department.

The leading transnational tobacco company **Philip Morris International (PMI)** donated 50 ventilators through its Greek subsidiary, Papastatos, to Intensive Care Units in **Greece**. Despite strong criticism of this **"shameful publicity stunt"**, the Health Minister Vassilis Kikilias thanked Papastratos for **"its significant contribution to strengthening the national health system"**. This attempt by **PMI** to subvert **Article 5.3** of the FCTC, which requires Parties to denormalise tobacco industry philanthropy, is also evident in **Germany** where the Berlin Senate Department for Health accepted an offer to use the **Philip Morris GmbH Neukölln** production site as a **temporary distribution and logistics center for PPE**..



Figure 19 Illva Saronno branded hand sanitizer / Illva Saronno

Alcohol producers address shortages of hand sanitiser

Caribbean **West Indies Rum & Spirits Producers' Association** companies **donate hand sanitiser and alcohol in various countries**:

In **Trinidad & Tobago**, Angostura re-direct one of its product lines to manufacturer 70,000 bottles of sanitiser. Brugal distribute 150,000 litres of 70 percent alcohol to the National Health Service in the **Dominican Republic**. National Rums of Jamaica donates 10,000 litres of 95 percent alcohol and J. Wray and Nephew donate 50,000 litres of alcohol and 20,000 litres of hand sanitiser to The National Health Fund in **Jamaica**

Kenya **Diageo** commit to supply 135,000 litres of sanitiser as part of global pledge to produce more than 8 million bottles in hand sanitiser **"aimed at overcoming shortages to protect frontline healthcare workers"**

South Africa **South African Breweries (SAB)** supplies **10,000 bottles of hand sanitiser** to medical clinic in Johannesburg.

United Kingdom The **Scotch Whisky Association** launch an online platform for distillers to **"support health services on the frontline [...] and also other essential services that need additional supplies of hand sanitiser"**

Brazil **Unilever Brazil** collaborating with **Heineken** to manufacture **270,000 bottles of sanitiser** to distribute to 2 million residents in São Paulo's favelas.

India **Pernod Ricard India** provides 40,000 litres of sanitiser to local communities, key workers and the police across 17 states, described by the **European Commission** in a blog on the EU's private sector response to COVID-19 as **"helping to fill the gap in supplies of preventive solutions and critical care equipment"**

Italy In Italy, Illva Saronno Group, a distilled spirit company, **packaged and labelled miniature bottles of hand sanitiser with branding resembling their spirits**, and donated and distributed them via welfare agencies.

3. Corporate philanthropy and COVID-19 funds

Beyond CSR to address shortages in health systems that divert attention from health damaging products that directly contribute to preventable NCDs exacerbating COVID-19, large philanthropic donations have been used to secure legitimacy and manage corporate reputations by some of the largest companies.

The tobacco industry has long recognised the political value of corporate philanthropy for reputation management, and this is also evident in the COVID-19 response of **Japan Tobacco International**, which made a USD 300,000 donation to health facilities and schools in the Kaoma and Nkeyema Districts of **Zambia**. This comparatively small charitable donation generated reputational benefits, with the Nkeyema District Commissioner praising **JTI** as “[an all-weather partner to various government ministries \[...\] through its Corporate Social Responsibility.](#)”

Food and alcohol companies have also used large philanthropic donations as a means to secure legitimacy and political capital, with **MARS** donating USD 2 million to the World Food Programme, described by its CEO as “[doing our part to prevent the spread of the virus and caring for our communities.](#)” In a similar CSR initiative, **AB InBev** Urban Development Foundation donated RMB 1 million in cash to Pingfang District government in **China** that the company portrayed as the “remarkable” response of **Budweiser China** to COVID-19 that “[continue to inspire our operations around the world.](#)”

Moreover, the establishment of **COVID-19 emergency funds** in several countries has provided unhealthy commodity industries with invaluable opportunities to secure legitimacy, project solidarity, and build relationships with policy makers. For example, in **Kenya**, the emergency fund launched by President Kenyatta is [chaired by the managing director of Kenya Breweries](#), Jane Karuku, while a donation of [Sh10.6m by BAT Kenya](#) puts the country’s largest cigarette manufacturer among the main contributors to the fund. In **Uganda**, a national address by President Museveni named two tobacco companies, **Leaf Tobacco and Merchandise Ltd** and **Meridian Tobacco Company**, among those listed as prominent contributors to national fundraising efforts, with a combined contribution of around Ugx.250 000. This announcement led to a petition from the Uganda National Health Users’/Consumers’ Organization to the National Task Force for COVID-19, protesting that such tobacco industry donations breached national legislation and [contravened obligations under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#). Other contributors to Uganda’s national COVID-19 fund include **Coca-Cola Beverages Africa**. Their donation of Ugx. 1.3billion and gift of three pick-up trucks to the Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 fleet received a public welcome from the Prime Minister, Ruhakana Rugunda, praising Coca-

Cola as having been “[a long-standing partner with us in many ways. Let’s continue the fight against COVID-19 together.](#)”

The COVID-19 Trust Fund established by the government in **Ghana** received a high profile [donation from the global online gambling company Betway](#). The Minister of Energy, John Peter Amewu, was pictured receiving a cheque for GH 150,000 from Betway, whose local operating company is Sports Betting Group Limited. Ghana’s Trust Fund has also received a diverse range of product donations from across unhealthy commodity industries. **Guinness Ghana Breweries**, the local operating company of leading spirits producer **Diageo**, provided the Ministry of Information with 1,500 packs of its [Malta Guinness](#). This donation of non-alcoholic malted drinks was presented as being in support of frontline workers “to recognize them for their bravery and say thank you for their sacrifices.” In similar vein, the distributors of **Indomie Instant Noodles**, **Tolaram Group** donated GHS1 million and a package of their products to the COVID-19 National Trust Fund, with their products being directed to vulnerable households during lockdown in support of the government’s food assistance program. And **Total Petroleum Ghana** made a presentation to the COVID-19 National Trust Fund comprising of 100 [Total Cards](#), each with a value of 230 litres of fuel, worth a total sum of GH¢100,000.

“These industries are gaining more grounds and winning the trust of the people through their actions-‘so called kind gestures’. They are deliberately and consciously penetrating into the hearts and minds of the people. A contributing factor for the high increase in NCD cases.”

Labram Musah, National Coordinator, Ghana NCD Alliance

Moreover, several companies have made a concerted effort to link responses to COVID-19 with existing corporate philanthropy in other areas. For example, in its press release announcing a USD 20 million ‘Community Fund’ to address the “disproportionate social and economic impact of COVID-19 on black communities and businesses” in the **United States**, **Diageo** underlined the importance of “[long-standing partnerships with the National Urban League and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.](#)” The **Pepsico Foundation** have announced a similar USD 7 million initiative to “[provide increased medical and economic aid to communities of color across the country](#)” including USD 1 million to the civil rights organisation **National Urban League**. The **Pernod Ricard India Foundation** have re-oriented its [Social Impact Incubator for Women Entrepreneurs](#) to focus on COVID-19 solutions. All these examples highlight how companies have sought to link COVID-19 to existing CSR initiatives, highlighting the extent to which corporate responses to the pandemic have served to advance longstanding strategic objectives..

4. Creating “solutions”, shaping the agenda

Finally, CSR has centred on COVID-19 ‘solutions’ which attempt to address areas of reputational vulnerability by reframing issues and shaping how the company is perceived. In this sense, it may have a legitimating function in creating the impression of CSR initiatives as innovative solutions to the health and social impacts of COVID-19.

Perhaps the most overt example of CSR being used to attempt to shape perceptions of a company, was **British American Tobacco’s** announcement of a “potential vaccine in development for COVID-19”. In its press release, the company describes “[exploring partnerships with government agencies](#)” and refers to interactions with the US Food and Drug Administration and UK Department of Health and Social Care to “[bring its vaccine to clinical studies as soon as possible.](#)” Despite making comparable claims about a treatment for [Ebola](#) (Zatoński et al., 2020) this press release was reproduced without comment in several media outlets including [The Guardian](#), [Financial Times](#) and [Bloomberg](#). In this way, tobacco companies have exploited media interest in COVID-19 solutions as a way to present the industry as a good corporate citizen.

Having received widespread criticism from NGOs for its [refusal to contemplate abandoning single-use plastics](#) at the [World Economic Forum 2020](#), the largest bottler of **Coca-Cola** in the **United States** has partnered with the US Department of Health and Human Services to manufacture plastic tubes for use in [COVID-19 testing kits](#). The Coca-Cola Company described this initiative as “[utilizing existing soda bottle preforms to produce more than 7 million tubes each week](#)”, which featured as a prominent item on the Coca-Cola website as one of the “new solutions” developed to support local communities.

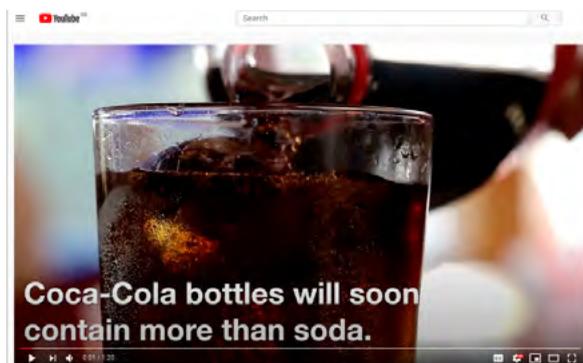


Figure 20. Oak Ridge National Laboratory / YouTube

AB InBev have committed to distribute 1.4 million litres of potable water to 240,000 people in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro communities, as part of its ‘[COVID-19 response for the people of Brazil](#)’. Distributed via its [AMA](#) bottled water brand, which AB InBev describes as donating 100 percent of its profits to “[bring drinking water to poverty-stricken communities](#)”, this commitment supports wider CSR practices intended to address water scarcity as an area of [reputational vulnerability](#) for alcohol producers. Building on a [high-profile partnership](#) between the AB InBev company Stella Artois and the development aid organisation Water.org, its COVID-19 response has created additional opportunities to shape the agenda and a source of legitimation for AB InBev as a responsible corporate partner in [water stewardship](#).

AB InBev have also sought to use its COVID-19 response to shape the agenda around gender-based violence and shift attention away from an [association with alcohol use](#). For example, the ‘[No Excuse](#)’ campaign in **South Africa** centres around a [WhatsApp helpline](#) as the solution to sharp increases in gender-based violence during national lockdown. In focusing on individualised solutions to gender-based violence, the initiative serves to displace attention away from alcohol consumption as a driver of violence against women.

CHAPTER III

PURSUING PARTNERSHIPS, COVETING COLLABORATION

A key feature of the global response to COVID-19 has been the reaffirmation of international commitments to multi-sectoral collaboration to achieve health goals, and to leverage the resources, distribution networks and expertise of private sector actors. While such approaches are central to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, underpinned by the SDG 17 commitment to promoting Partnerships for the Goals, their appropriateness in the context of unhealthy commodity industries is challenged by conflicts between commercial interests and global health and development objectives. (Collin et al 2017) This is most widely recognised in the case of tobacco, where the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) seeks to [prevent public health partnerships and collaboration with the tobacco industry](#). Similar concerns in relation to the [infant formula industry](#) shape efforts to implement the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (Costello et al 2017), WHO has developed a [tool](#) to support member states in managing conflict of industry in nutrition policy, (Ralston et al 2020) and there has been increasing concern about inappropriate partnerships involving the alcohol industry. (Marten et al 2020)

The pursuit of partnerships and collaborative relationships with governments, international agencies, and leading civil society organisations is central to corporate political activity, with particular significance among controversial industries. Such collaborations promise diverse benefits, including association with the legitimacy and reputation of more trusted partners, enhanced access to elites, and the promotion of ineffective policies that don't challenge commercial interests. (Collin et al 2017; Fooks and Gilmore 2013; Mialon and da Silva Gomes 2019; Ulucanlar et al 2016; McCambridge et al 2018; Tanrikulu et al 2020)

It is important to note that our focus here is on examining the strategic significance of such relationships for these industries in advancing corporate objectives, alongside a recognition of the complex challenges and dilemmas confronting governments, international agencies and NGOs in responding to the COVID-19 crisis amid often severe and increasing financial pressures. Our mapping of unhealthy commodity industry initiatives highlights the importance attached to building these relationships, evident in the scale and scope of efforts to establish and promote links at national level, with governments and with civil society; via global partnerships with health and development agencies, and through creating a perception of partnership even where no such collaboration exists.

1. Partnering with governments

In **Mozambique**, the local operating company of brewing giant **AB InBev**, [Cervejas De Moçambique \(CDM\)](#), depicted a series of initiatives as undertaken in partnership with and in support of the Ministry of Health. These began with a donation of 4,000 liters of hand sanitizer to the Ministry for distribution to hospitals and healthcare professional. In an accompanying [YouTube](#) video this was endorsed by Minister of Health Armindo Tiago as “a donation with considerable impact in preventing the pandemic” and as indicative of CDM’s “sense of social responsibility, their sense of sharing, in a gesture of friendship.” Subsequent actions by CDM included replacing its billboard and digital advertising with educational messages, promoting safe hygiene and sanitation practices, and “developing materials to assist bars and restaurants in adhering to preventive measures when they are allowed to reopen”

In **Jamaica**, CSR initiatives undertaken by the local spirits producer **J Wray and Nephew (JWN)**, were presented as [a partnership involving the Rural Agricultural Development Authority and the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture and Fisheries](#). This entailed provision of “food packages, supermarket vouchers, hand sanitisers, masks, and [JWN products](#)”; JWN product lines comprise Jamaica’s largest wines and spirits portfolio. JWN’s donation of 100,000 litres of alcohol and hand sanitisers to the National Health Service via the National Health Fund was described as the company having “worked with the Government to ensure that public hospitals and clinics maintain international sanitation standards.”

Leading retail and grocery multinational [Walmart](#) described its development of drive-thru COVID testing sites in supermarket parking lots across the **United States** as responding to “a call from the White House asking Walmart to work with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and other partners.” In Florida, one such testing site was advertised via a **Pepsi-sponsored poster**, with location details accompanied by Pepsi and Walmart logos, the image of a large glass of iced soda, and the ‘That’s what I like’ Pepsi slogan. The poster was withdrawn after criticism of the [“dystopian hell”](#) evoked by such commodification of the pandemic.



Figure 21. firr / Twitter

2. Collaborating with civil society

In many country contexts, unhealthy commodity industries use donations and other forms of collaboration with leading local and national charities and NGOs as vehicles to advance the strategic objectives of corporate initiatives. From the perspective of corporate political activity, such engagements can offer major strategic advantages in linking global giants with the national esteem and local legitimacy of prominent campaigning organisations, and in associating manufacturers of damaging products with health objectives and with broader goals of social justice, poverty reduction and development.

In **Thailand**, for example, **PepsiCo** partnered with the anti-poverty agency **Raks Thai**, a member of CARE International, to reach vulnerable communities across Thailand. The **'Give for Hope' partnership with Raks Thai** was announced as a commitment of US\$ 550,000 (Bt 18 million) from PepsiCo Thailand, Suntory PepsiCo Beverages Thailand and The PepsiCo Foundation to support communities, farmers and health workers. Within this, the 'Give Meals Give Hope' project in Thailand was established with the objective of distribution over one million meals in 3 months. In marketing materials on social media, Raks Thai was described by Pepsi as "**our food distribution partner across Thailand**", and while the distributed meals were described as nutritious they were packaged in durable bags embossed with the **logos of Pepsi, the PepsiCo Foundation and Lays potato chips alongside their partner Raks Thai**. An initiative depicted as **'PepsiCo Gives Back'** therefore served as a marketing opportunity linking a nutrition project and a leading anti-poverty agency directly with the promotion of sugar sweetened beverages and unhealthy snack foods.

A focus on access to food and nutrition emerges as a prominent theme guiding partnerships and collaborations initiated by leading global producers of ultra-processed food and drink products, and **Food Banks** are frequently selected as vehicles for such donations in responding to COVID-19. The majority **PepsiCo's** reported distribution of \$5m via charitable organizations is allocated to food banks in **Australia, Belgium, Egypt, France,**



Figure 22. PepsiThai / Facebook



Figure 23. Mospicle C. Rattanapirom / Facebook



Figure 24. Mospicle C. Rattanapirom / Facebook

Netherlands, New Zealand, UK and in Latin America via the **Global FoodBanking Network** where it supports work across **Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru** and **Uruguay**.

The **Global FoodBanking Network**, along with **Food Donation Connection** and **Feeding America** also constitute key partners for **McDonald's** increased food donations in the context of the rapid decline in custom across their fast food restaurants. McDonald's describes such collaborations as demonstrating that "we could deepen our impact in communities if we leveraged the agility of our supply chain to get more quality food into the hands of NGO partners." With Feeding America endorsing the partnership as an opportunity to ensure "that this quality food is getting into the hands of people who need it", McDonald's were able to present the donation of unused food to NGOs as indicative of a commitment to addressing the global challenge of food security.

Kraft Heinz Canada is similarly promoting its partnership with **Food Banks Canada**, via which it is reportedly providing 1 million meals to Canadians in need. This collaboration centres on **Kraft Heinz Project Pantry**, with the accompanying twitter campaign indicating that such meals include ultra-processed products such as Kraft Dinner macaroni cheese and peanut butter. The campaign links such products with the company's claim to be "working hard to put food on every Canadian table" and the partnership with Food Banks Canada buttresses its "We're with you, Canada" invocation of national solidarity.

While such food industry initiatives form part of a familiar and established pattern of making strategic use of collaborations with respected NGOs, the response to COVID-19 has also included partnerships with the gaming/gambling industry. The online gaming company **Flowplay** developed a fundraising collaboration with American Cancer Society to generate funds to support Hope Lodge facilities, which offer cancer patients and their caregivers a free place to stay. Flowplay introduced an in-game charm for players to purchase within its online casino Vegas World. In the context of "longer session times, ... more players playing... [and] record numbers of concurrent players", this online game led to donations to ACS exceeding \$250,000. In expressing gratitude for these donations, an ACS vice president explicitly situated them in the context of COVID-19's impacts on the charity sector: "We are extremely grateful to Vegas World players and FlowPlay for their generosity helping the American Cancer Society to continue to save lives. Like many organizations, the Society is facing unimaginable challenges to its fundraising. Without companies and individuals stepping forward to help, more lives will be lost to this disease than one in three people will face throughout their lives."

3. Global partnerships and collaborations with leading health and development agencies

International organisations have placed substantial (and understandable) emphasis on leveraging resources from the private sector within efforts to drive the international COVID-19 response via multi-sectoral collaboration and global partnerships. Notable here has been the creation of the **COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for WHO**, and while its due diligence processes prohibit funding from alcohol, arms, and tobacco industries, this has provided opportunities for ultra-processed food and drink manufacturers to signal active engagement in the global response. Hence **Pepsico's** account of its funding towards a global response notes that "\$2 million is going to the World Health Organization COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund", **Mondelez International Foundation** is also listed among the list of the Fund's supporters, while the **Starbucks Foundation** committed \$1m.

In both Central Asia and Latin America, the **Coca-Cola Foundation** has engaged with the **UN Development Program (UNDP)** in COVID-19 response initiatives presented as demonstrating the value of partnership approaches to promoting health and sustainable development. In **Armenia**, a UNDP webpage detailing a collaboration to supply emergency medical equipment states that the Coca-Cola Foundation and UNDP "provide global and local solutions to improve the situation", with the UNDP Resident Representative describing collaboration with the private sector as "critical to prevent and better manage such crises." In **Tajikistan**, UNDP were the recipients of a \$50,000 donation from the Coca-Cola Foundation to purchase of PPE, disinfectants and hand sanitizer. A UNDP **Uzbekistan** press release announcing a \$200,000 donation to provide medical equipment presents the agency as being "entrusted to implement this mission on behalf of Coca-Cola" in supporting health system capacity and outlines in-country collaboration with the Coca-Cola Foundation since 2011. It concludes by noting that "partnerships with private sector companies like Coca-Cola play an important role during the COVID-19 crisis by joining forces in supporting national responses," accompanied by images of SDG3 Good Health and Well-Being and SDG17 Partnerships for the Goals.

In **Bolivia**, the Coca-Cola Foundation donated \$299,153 via UNDP to provide assistance to healthcare workers and vulnerable populations. And in **Uruguay**, Minister of Public Health Daniel Salinas greeted representatives of UNDP and Coca Cola Montevideo Refescros, the latter providing a donation via which UNDP would increase availability of PPE for health officials.



Figure 25. UNDP Armenia announces partnership with Coca Cola



Figure 26. UNDP Uzbekistan announces partnership with Coca Cola

Leading international charities are also routes via which key actors across unhealthy commodity industries have sought to position themselves as partners in efforts to address the health and social impacts of the pandemic. **Red Cross and Red Crescent** societies have been particularly prominent within corporate strategies to partner with disaster relief efforts across international and national contexts.

Notably, these have included donations from the tobacco industry. In the **United States**, the **American Red Cross** were listed among recipients of a \$500,000 **donation from Altria**, the parent company of Philip Morris USA and manufacturers of Marlboro. In **Croatia**, **BAT** describes “donating funds to the Red Cross to provide food parcels to communities in tobacco growing areas,” in **Romania**, **Philip Morris is reported to have donated EUR 900,000** for medical equipment and PPE via the Red Cross. And the **Philippine Red Cross** received a **P15-million laboratory to boost its COVID-19 testing capacity from the Lucio Tan Group**, whose companies include the tobacco company **PMFTC** tobacco company as well as **Asia Brewery** and **Tanduay Distillers**.

AB InBev companies have also been prominent among alcohol industry contributors to Red Cross societies. In the **United States**, Budweiser made a commitment to donate \$5m to the American Red Cross “**as it redeploys cash earmarked for sports and entertainment toward containing the outbreak, as well as allocating its media airtime toward relaying public service announcements.**” Budweiser Canada are similarly reported to have redirected **\$500,000 of sports investments to the Canadian Red Cross**, while in **South Korea** the **Korean Red Cross** received a **donation of face masks and hand sanitizers from Oriental Brewing Company (OBC)**. The Netherlands-based brewing giant **Heineken** announced a **donation of €15 million** to support the work of the **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)**, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Red Cross societies have been particularly prominent as preferred partners of ultra-processed food and drink producers in their responses to the pandemic. The **Coca-Cola Foundation** reports **donations totalling almost \$15m** to affiliated organisations; this includes \$ 1.75m donation to the IFRC to support emergency assistance efforts across eleven countries in West Africa, as well as donations to 48 national societies, ranging from \$40,000 to the **Barbados Red Cross** to fund work in **Barbados, Grenada, and Saint Kitts and Nevis** to \$1.5m to the **Turkish Red Crescent** for PPE and food assistance. **PepsiCo reports donations to Red Cross societies** in **Belgium, France, Italy, Lebanon, Netherlands, Spain** and to **Hubei Red Cross** in **China**, while **Mondelez International** cites contributions to Red Cross societies in **15 countries** across North America, Europe, and Asia. Nestlé’s account of its corporate response to the pandemic places a particularly strong emphasis on active partnership with the IFRC. Its press release describes the IFRC as “**a strong and trusted global partner** of Nestlé” and states that the organisations “share common values, including a determination to make a difference on the ground.”

In similar vein, a number of leading global food and beverage transnationals have chosen to partner with **Save the Children** in their CSR responses to COVID-19. PepsiCo, for example has donated to Save the Children programmes in Italy, and also claims to have provided **10 million nutritious meals in Mexico** for out of school children and their families in collaboration with **Save the Children** and **Un Kilo De Ayuda**. In **Indonesia** Mondelez International is partnering with Save the Children and **Wahana Visi Indonesia** to distribute hygiene kits, hand washing stations, facemasks, food and other essential products to farming communities via its **Cocoa Life** project. Mondelez International lists Save the Children among its key global partners in responding to COVID-19, initiatives that builds upon a well-established collaboration.

Save the Children includes Mondelez Cocoa Life and Mondelez International Foundation among its global corporate partnerships, in which context the latter's president presents its programmes in Mexico, India and Italy, as "[aligned with United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, addressing malnutrition and promoting good health and well-being](#)"

“Health advocates at the Heart Foundation of Jamaica view with concern the increased levels of food donation seen during the COVID pandemic. Although this is a worthy venture, the food marketplace has become more complex, often the donations include unhealthy foods and beverages which have unintended health consequences and can derail achievements made towards healthy eating practices. Our most basic health requirements are to consume a nutritionally wholesome diet and sustain adequate physical activity. The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses and obesogenic drivers pervading our food and beverage environment. Coupled with increased marketing by big players in the industry, this can lead to poor food choices. We note that selected CSOs (some with international affiliations) are integrally involved in the distribution of these unhealthy foods and beverages. With an absence of protocols for food donations to be used by governments for public or private sector, this becomes even more concerning.”

Deborah Chen, Executive Director, Heart Foundation Jamaica

4. Projecting an appearance of partnership

The examples presented above entail some action, engagement or endorsement from the organisations with which companies seek to collaborate, even if in many instances that may be tacit in the acceptance of funding. In other contexts, however, industry actors may seek to promote an image of legitimacy by projecting an appearance of partnership where no such engagement has occurred.

In March the global gaming industry launched a promotional campaign badged as #PlayApartTogether, which combined marketing of online games by some of the industry's biggest companies with a claim to be promoting social distancing and other preventive health practices. A key feature of the campaign and associated messaging was the portrayal of engagement with the World Health Organization. This was varyingly reported as the industry having "[agreed to disseminate key messages from the World Health Organization](#)"; as WHO "[enlisting the global gaming industry to reach millions](#)"; as WHO "using video games to share the importance of social distancing" in "[WHO's Play Apart Together campaign](#)"; as gaming companies having "[joined the World Health Organization \(WHO\) #PlayApartTogether coronavirus awareness campaign](#)", and even as WHO recommending "[staying inside and playing video games all day.](#)"

Such a recommendation appears implausible given WHO's recognition of the damaging health impacts of what it has categorised as [gaming disorder](#), and indeed the entire 'collaboration' around #PlayApartTogether is illusory; WHO had no involvement in the design or development of the [Play Apart Together] campaign and did not partner or collaborate with the gaming industry on that initiative.



Figure 27. Play Apart Together campaign logo incorrectly credited to WHO / VentureBeat

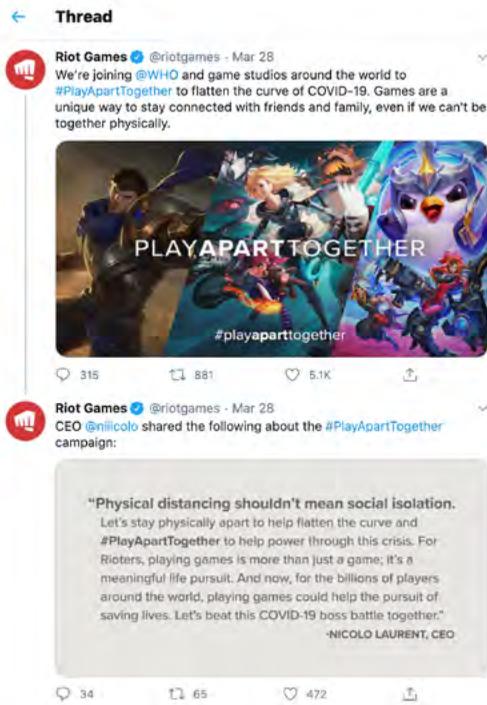


Figure 28. Riotgames promotes Play Apart Together campaign / Twitter



Figure 29. Kimkardashian promotes Play Apart Together campaign / Twitter

In **New Zealand**, the alcohol industry funded social aspect organisation Cheers adopts a more subtle but recognisably similar strategy in its #drinknormal campaign, referring to the New Zealand government's low-risk alcohol drinking advice as the "Ministry of Health safe drinking guidelines," with the hyperlink sending readers to Cheers own page on how "moderate drinking can fit into a balanced lifestyle" rather than to a Ministry of Health resource. Similarly, **Pepsico** describes its donations in Latin America as serving "to train workers on how to reduce COVID-19 transmission, in accordance with World Health Organization guidelines."

More broadly, unhealthy commodity industries have utilised corporate responses to COVID-19 within strategies to frame themselves as partners in strategies to promote health and sustainable development, seeking to distract public and regulatory attention from their roles in driving industrial epidemics of NCDs. Hence the world's dominant beer producer, **AB InBev**, badges its account of its international initiatives in responding to COVID-19 as demonstrating "More Ways We Are Part of the Solution." And the individual case studies of actions by its local operating countries repeatedly invoke the language of partnership and longstanding collaboration. In **Peru**, the account is prefaced with the assertion that for "more than 140 years, Backus and Peru have been working together in union", in **Ecuador** the headline claim is that "Cervecería Nacional shows 'together we are stronger'," while in **India** the president of AB InBev South Asia proclaims that "we stand in solidarity with our communities and governments."

Such imagery is central to the ways in which industry umbrella organisations seek to portray the actions taken by their member organisations regarding the pandemic. The **International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD)**, representing the world's leading alcohol producers, cites a joint call by WHO and the International Chamber of Commerce for multi-sectoral efforts to counter COVID-19 and describes its members as "committed to keep working in partnership to do so: helping protect communities across the world and fight COVID-19, as part of a whole-of-society approach." The **International Food and Beverage Alliance (IFBA)** similarly cites a joint call for collective action by the Directors General of WHO, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). IFBA gives an account of how "companies across the food and beverage industry are rallying to this call to help those most affected", including of involvement in "Global partnerships to deliver aid" presented as demonstrating that "Covid-19 isn't constrained by borders – and neither is goodwill."

CHAPTER IV

SHAPING POLICY ENVIRONMENTS

Unhealthy commodity industries have a long history of seeking to influence public policy in order to protect, expand and exploit their markets. The context of the COVID-19 crisis has created a number of opportunities to advance such goals, particularly given the pressure that governments are grappling with in trying to reconcile protecting public health with addressing major financial and trade pressures. The respondents to this crowdsourcing initiative provided multiple examples of companies seeking to shape lockdown responses, the exit from lockdown, and more long-term policy responses in ways favourable to their commercial interests. These examples include lobbying to have unhealthy commodities included in lists of ‘essential’ products; working to undermine health and environmental regulation; seeking to accelerate the easing of lockdown; and attempting to shape strategies for economic recovery. The latter, in particular, highlights the significance of ongoing monitoring of corporate political activity by unhealthy commodity industries if opportunities to build back better are to be realised.

1. Unhealthy commodities classed as ‘essential’

As governments implemented lockdown restrictions, producers of tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed foods and drinks campaigned to have their products categorised as part of the essential supply-chain. Governments in several countries included these products on official lists of ‘essential’ commodities so that their manufacture, distribution and sale would not be interrupted during national lockdowns.

In **Bangladesh** – one of the largest tobacco markets in the world – the **Ministry of Industry declared cigarettes an ‘essential commodity’** and instructed its regional offices to cooperate with tobacco companies in ensuring the production and distribution of cigarettes was not interrupted during the country’s lockdown response. The decision followed **submissions to the Minister from local subsidiaries of British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International**. The Bangladeshi Health Ministry subsequently requested that tobacco production and sales be halted during the lockdown, but this request was turned down by the Ministry of Industries on the basis that Bangladesh would **“lose valuable foreign exchange and revenue”**.

The government in **Kenya** included **tobacco, alcohol and processed food and beverages** on their official list of essential items and services, describing such products as **“essential to the sustenance of lives and efforts”** and

granting manufacturers special protection to continue the production and movement of these products during lockdown. The special status of tobacco and alcohol was opposed by local **civil society groups**, who warned of the growing risk posed by non-communicable diseases and urged the government **“not to replace one pandemic with another.”**

In **Europe**, lobby groups for the **alcohol** and **processed food** industries called on governments to ensure the ongoing production and distribution of their products – at the same time as **unions** were calling for a pause on non-essential production to protect workers’ health and safety. **FoodDrinkEurope** called on EU Member States to **“recognise the entire food supply chain as essential”** in order to ensure that food industry employees could continue to work and products move freely across borders. Spirits Europe similarly called on governments to **“Recognize the strategic importance of the food supply chain, including the spirits sector, as an essential activity”**. The **UK government** subsequently included off-licence retailers in their list of essential shops that could stay open during the lockdown, leading breweries to call for relaxation of regulations governing licenced businesses. Alcohol delivery sales were permitted by some local authorities in **England** and **Scotland**.

In the **USA**, there have been calls to allow **online sales and home delivery of tobacco, alcohol and e-cigarettes, and for shops selling e-cigarettes and cannabis to be categorised as essential retailers on the grounds of public health importance and to encourage “buying from local retailers”**. Several states included **cannabis** on their lists of essential products. A **spokesperson for a cannabis delivery service** noted this shift in government perception was important for the long-term sustainability of the cannabis industry, explaining “...it’s very apparent that this is a product that people need”. In a similar vein, the **CEO of Nestlé** was quoted saying that **snack foods were “just as important as essential nutrients”**.

2. Pressures on public health and environmental regulation

There are multiple examples of health-damaging industries seeking exemptions or weakening of regulatory restrictions on their activities during government lockdowns – particularly in high income countries, where regulatory controls are often viewed as being more restrictive. While relaxation or suspension of regulatory controls was usually called for as part of governments’ emergency responses to COVID-19, there

have been growing demands from businesses for such measures to be maintained or even extended in order to boost economic recovery in the post-crisis period.

In **North America**, there is evidence that **oil, gas and petrochemical industries** have used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to lobby for weakening environmental protections and to secure regulatory exemptions and protections. In the **USA**, the executives of nine oil and gas companies are reported to have met with President Trump and members of Congress to lobby for support under the COVID-19 stimulus bill and for access to additional storage via the US strategic petroleum reserve. Several US Senators subsequently wrote to the Secretary for the Interior asking him to suspend federal royalty payments from the oil and gas industries. Wider lobbying measures include efforts to weaken fuel efficiency standards, suspend enforcement of environmental protections and for the components of the oil and petrochemical industries to be categorised as essential infrastructure. At the same time, a lobby group for the oil industry petitioned congressional delegates to oppose investment in renewable energy sources, framing consideration of such investments as “Taking advantage of a national emergency to pursue a political agenda” and describing this as “immature political opportunism in a time when American’s lives are literally at stake.” The **Canadian** government was lobbied by the oil industry to suspend environmental regulations relating to pollution monitoring and Indigenous rights during the COVID-19 crisis. The **Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers** – an industry lobby group – argued that current climate change policy was now out of date since “COVID-19 will have significant implications on emissions and the economy”. As a local health advocate noted, “Canada’s oil industry is lobbying for regulatory exemptions and a halt to new climate policy in the midst of a health crisis exacerbated by air pollution.”

In **Europe**, **car manufacturers** similarly called for a delay in the introduction of industry carbon emission targets due to the COVID-19 crisis. Efforts to weaken regulatory controls have also been evident from the alcohol and processed food industries. **Alcohol producers** in several jurisdictions (including **Sweden** and the **European Union**) lobbied for lower alcohol taxes as a crisis measure. In **France**, the government came under pressure to reverse its longstanding ban on alcohol sponsorship of sports events. A Senate report recommended the relaxing of the ‘Loi Evin’ which has banned alcohol and tobacco advertising in French sports grounds since 1991. Alcohol sponsorship – worth an estimated 30-50 million Euros annually – was proposed as a means of countering the financial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, which is estimated to have cost over 500 million Euros in the football sector alone.

In **Scotland**, the government agreed to withdraw a new bill introducing restrictions on junk food promotions. A spokesperson for the **Scottish Food and Drink Federation** congratulated the Scottish Government on having listened to its members concerns and avoiding measures that would have a “devastating economic impact” on Scottish businesses: “Our food and drink manufacturers are facing increasingly difficult times due to the impact of the coronavirus crisis, as well as the uncertainty around the UK’s future trade deals with the EU and further afield.”

3. Pressure to accelerate emergence from lockdown

In countries where the activities of unhealthy commodity industries were restricted during lockdown periods, businesses were vocal in calling for such restrictions to be lifted as early as possible. Bans on alcohol sales were a particular target for such efforts, with the governments in **South Africa** and **Thailand** coming under pressure to reverse sales bans introduced as part of the emergency response to COVID-19.

The government of **South Africa** was unusual in imposing a complete ban on alcohol sales in the early stages of the country’s COVID-19 crisis, in an effort to reduce pressure on hospitals and emergency services. The ban was initially lifted on 1 June but subsequently re-imposed on 12 July amidst strong industry opposition. A spokesperson for **South African Breweries** (owned by multinational alcohol company **Anheuser-Busch InBev**) argued that the sales ban would fuel the illicit alcohol market and place unnecessary demands on “[a]n already strained and exhausted police force”. **SpiritsEurope** argued the ban hurt local farmers and resulted in loss of much-needed tax revenue, although they also acknowledged the ban had depressed European spirits exports and that “[o]ur member companies ... are deeply concerned about the uncertainty of current trading conditions”.)



Figure 30. Rodger Bosch/AFP/Getty / [The Guardian](#)

The **Thai** government – which, like South Africa, introduced an alcohol ban as part of its COVID-19 response – similarly came under pressure from the industry to allow alcohol sales to resume. Industry representatives called on the Thai government to allow takeaway and home delivery sales, and to provide tax relief to alcohol producers. The government subsequently lifted the ban much earlier than initially anticipated.

In **Australia**, representatives of the **alcohol industry** lobbied the state government in Western Australia to relax restrictions on take-away alcohol sales on the basis that these unfairly penalised local business falsely claiming that alcohol is “a way of life for many Australians and in moderation it’s good for your health”. The state government subsequently removed restrictions on alcohol sales after the industry advocated its own voluntary initiative to limit alcohol sales; however the voluntary initiative was discontinued after two weeks on the basis that sales were down and that “All evidence points to Australians continuing to enjoy moderate alcohol consumption as part of a healthy, balanced lifestyle”.

Restrictions on **gambling** have likewise been a focus for industry efforts to end lockdown restrictions. In **Latvia**, - where the government introduced a ban on online gambling at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak – industry representatives threatened legal action unless the ban was lifted. One gambling chief executive described the government’s decision as “ill-considered and hasty” and warned the industry could make ‘investment protection claims’ of up to 160 million Euro. In **Australia**, representatives of the gambling industry worked within a state-appointed taskforce providing recommendations to the Victorian government for the re-opening of casinos and other hospitality venues. The taskforce was led by the former head of gaming at Crown, one of Australia’s largest gaming groups, leading to concerns about the independence of the group’s advice. Concerns had previously been raised that Crown had received a state exemption to keep its Melbourne casino partly in operation during the early stages of the pandemic lockdown.

4. Attempts to shape recovery strategies

While weakening of regulatory controls is being widely presented as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is evidence that unhealthy commodity industries regard the crisis as an opportunity to shape policies in the longer-term. This is particularly evident in relation to the **alcohol industry**: beer producers in Europe and North America have actively lobbying governments to **introduce or extend tax relief** in the medium term. Alcohol producers in high-income countries are also petitioning their governments to **delay introduction of planned regulatory controls** (such as advertising restrictions) and to actively pursue **tariff-free arrangements in international trade negotiations** so they can benefit from unfettered access to foreign markets. Such measures are being framed as essential to countries’ economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beer producers across **Europe** have called for reductions value-added (sales) taxes to support the alcohol industry post-COVID-19. The German government’s decision to lower sales tax on alcohol from 19 to 16% was highlighted by the European brewing industry as a ‘creative’ initiative. Industry representative asked the European Commission to encourage other Member States to offer similar tax relief as part of the region’s post-pandemic Recovery Plan, and launched a **#RECONNECT** campaign to generate public support for such measures. In response, the European Commission “welcome[d] the initiatives and support that the brewers have provided to date during the pandemic” and noted that it had “suggested to Member States to show flexibility” with regard to sales tax.”

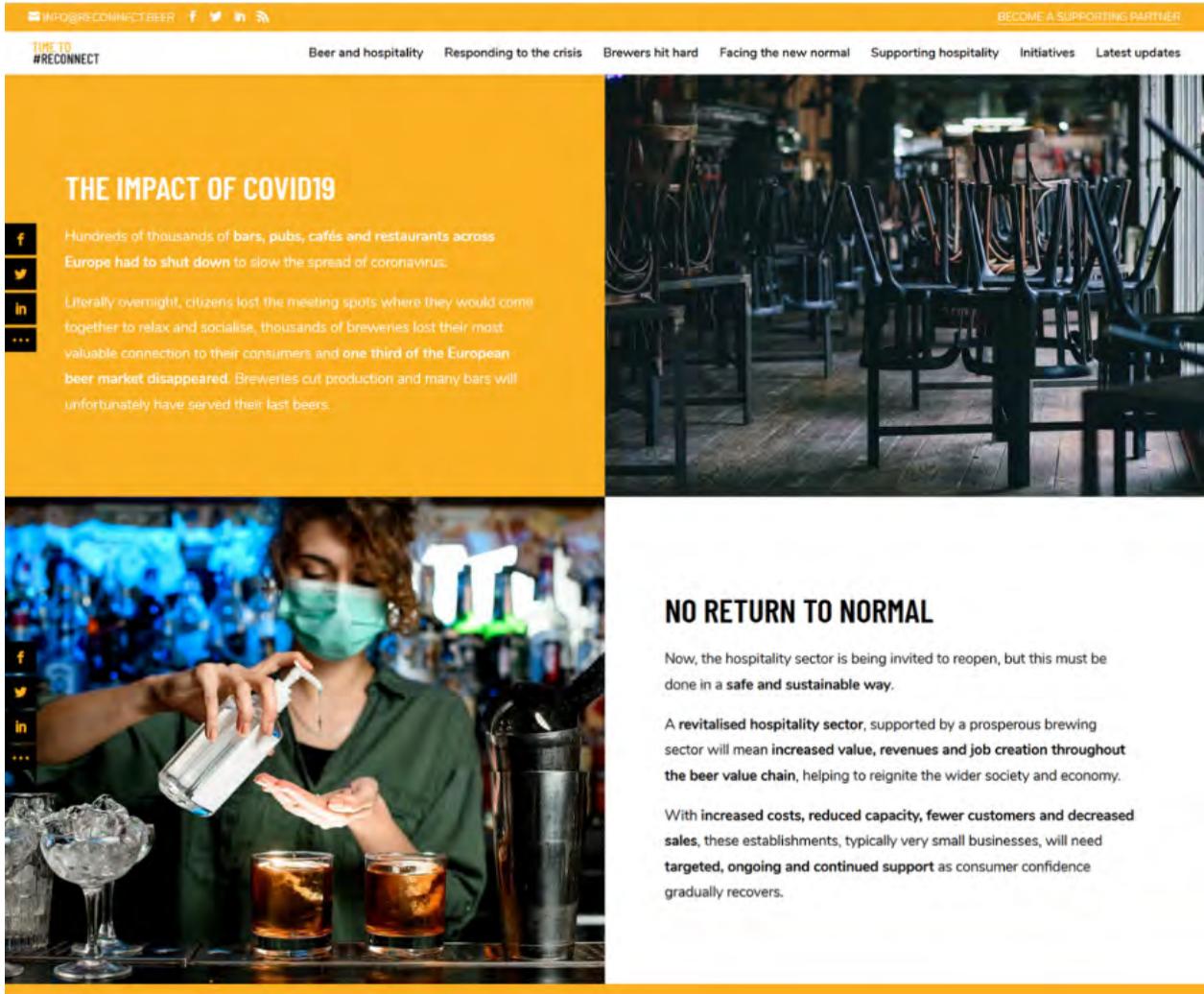


Figure 31. The Brewers of Europe #RECONNECT campaign

Beer producers in **Canada** called on their federal government to follow the example of various European countries in **providing tax relief**, with the UK held up as an exemplar for suspending further increases in alcohol excise tax.

Figure 32. Canadian brewers call on government to lower taxes / Facebook



In the **USA**, there are calls for states to allow restaurants and bars to continue home delivery of alcohol indefinitely. Many states loosened prohibitions on the sale of alcohol 'to-go' in the early stages of COVID-19 restrictions. There have since been efforts to make these changes permanent in a number of states (including New York, Michigan and Texas), with the Governor of Texas tweeting "From what I hear from Texans, we may just let this keep on going forever".

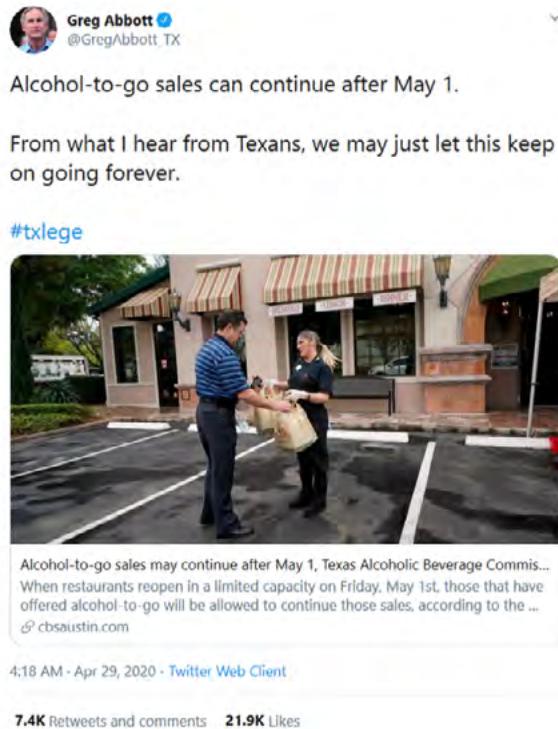


Figure 33. The Governor of Texas indicates alcohol-to-go may become permanent / Twitter

Spirits producers have called for lower taxes and promotion of free trade to "get the industry back up and running". **Spirits Europe** called for governments in **Europe** to apply tax waivers to distilleries that were also producing hand sanitiser, and for the **EU** and **USA** to "remove the tariffs on EU and US spirits and return to tariff-free transatlantic spirits trade." **FoodDrinkEurope** (an industry lobby group) called on the **European Commission** to "to facilitate a flexible and pragmatic regulatory environment... [and] to hold bilateral talks with our major trade partners to facilitate trade in food and drink products and... ensure that products can continue to move globally." The Scotch Whisky Association called for the **Scottish government** to abandon proposed advertising restrictions and

offered to engage in "a sustained dialogue with government on smart taxation" in order to support the post-COVID-19 recovery. They also petitioned the **UK government** to protect free trade in alcohol in order to "help with the post Covid-19 economic recovery", warning that tariffs risk "undermining any 'bounce back' recovery". Similarly, the **Irish Whiskey Association** and **Drinks Ireland** have called on the **Irish government** to support the employment of 'brand ambassadors' in key overseas markets. The Head of Drinks Ireland argued that "Supporting Irish exporters to reboot their brands and regain market position should be a key priority for Government" in the post-COVID period. The chief executive of Diageo – the world's biggest spirits producer – issued a call for "governments around the world to provide long-term recovery packages to help the hospitality sector. These businesses play an essential role... and sustain hundreds of millions of jobs, which provide a first foot on the employment ladder for young people."

Some survey respondents expressed concern that corporations were using the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to shape the policy environment in the longer term. One respondent highlighted the extent to which industry groups in the UK had used the crisis to gain an audience with key officials (including the Chancellor of the Exchequer) in an effort to influence government policy. They cited a piece by an investigative journalist in which a prominent lobbyist gave the UK government 'credit' for their willingness to listen to petitions from businesses such as the alcohol industry: "The officials, MPs and ministers we deal with have been incredibly receptive to the needs of business." The same piece described how The Adam Smith Institute – a libertarian think tank – had gone even further in seeking to make regulatory suspensions more permanent, developing a "blueprint for the new Britain" based on supporters' suggestions for "every tax cut that can lift a burden, every regulatory change that can lighten the load on businesses... every bureaucratic impediment that... might be suspended or permanently extinguished."

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS CORPORATE CAPTURE OR BUILDING BACK BETTER?

The most obvious findings emerging from a review of the submissions to this crowdsourcing project are the sheer scale and global reach of corporate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across unhealthy commodity industries, and particularly across alcohol and ultra-processed food and drink products. The volume of initiatives, activities and donations illustrated here are suggestive of the importance attached to being viewed as making substantial contributions to addressing health, social and economic dimensions of the crisis around the world.

In moving beyond a purely descriptive account of these diverse responses towards an appraisal of their strategic significance, equally striking is the consistency with which such corporate actions have been selected to advance longstanding strategic priorities. Hence multiple initiatives publicly presented as contributions to national or international efforts to combat the pandemic and support communities are designed to promote brands, products and corporations whose economic interests frequently conflict with public health goals. Across so many countries and regions, this consistency of purpose is illustrated across both the spheres of activity described here and across industries.

The rapid adaptation of marketing and promotional activities to address changing trading context and exploit lockdown demonstrates that a global crisis does not displace maximizing shareholder revenue as the key driver of corporate behaviour. The appropriation of health and social justice causes and frontline workers in ostensibly philanthropic initiatives vividly illustrates how corporate social responsibility programmes are shaped by promotional priorities and constitute a specific form of marketing. (Richards et al 2015) Similarly, the pandemic created new opportunities for companies to position themselves as partners in progress with governments, international organisations, health agencies and leading NGOs. Within broader programmes of corporate political activity, such collaborations can bring important reputational benefits, secure support across key stakeholders, provide scope for access to political elites and policy makers, and help circumscribe the scope of health interventions to unthreatening acts that don't challenge economic interests. (Ulucanlar et al 2016;

McCambridge et al 2018; Mialon and da Silva Gomes 2019) And respondents' concerns around industry efforts to influence public policy demonstrate the ongoing pursuit of strategic and commercial advantage across lockdown, transition and recovery phases of the pandemic.

The ways in which specific unhealthy commodity industries have chosen to engage with the pandemic are also aligned with their respective strategic priorities. This is evident in the prominence among initiatives by ultra-processed food and drinks producers to associate themselves with nutrition programmes and food banks, and in industry-sponsored physical activity promotions. The seemingly philanthropic work of alcohol companies in providing financial support and PPE to the hospitality sector is better viewed as lobbying and advocacy, while the Pernod Ricard Foundation's emphasis on supporting female entrepreneurs in India during the pandemic reinforces industry efforts to associate women drinking spirits with modernity, achievement and independence in key emerging markets. Tobacco companies have predictably seized on the crisis as an opportunity to portray themselves as positive contributors to societal goals, particularly in resource-limited contexts, while gambling and gaming companies have used philanthropy to indicate responsible citizenship while aggressively leveraging lockdown in promoting health harming behaviours online. This pattern of strategic consistency by unhealthy commodity industries in utilising the context of COVID-19 to advance long established goals, signalling virtue by visibly contributing to relief efforts while continuing to promote products and practices that harm health and fuel the NCD epidemic, is echoed in reports into corporate behaviours across other sectors.

Cumulatively, and in the absence of wider critique and effective responses within health and development communities, the behaviours and activities outlined in this report raise concerns about the prospect of a **corporate capture of COVID-19**. Adapting the concept of regulatory capture from economic, legal and political analyses, (Carpenter and Moss 2013) "COVID-capture" would here describe a context in which policy responses to the pandemic and economic crisis are directed away from coherent and effective public health approaches and towards protecting the vested interests of unhealthy commodity industries, by the intent and actions of those industries.

Importantly, there is nothing inevitable about such an outcome at national or international levels, and submissions to this crowdsourcing initiative highlight key elements of how to prevent industries defining responses to the pandemic or shaping policy agendas moving forward:

- Firstly, the comparatively small number and range of tobacco industry actions reported here highlights the **significance of effectively regulating conflict of interest**. This suggests that norms and practices such as those associated with FCTC Article 5.3 can constrain corporate interference. By contrast, the volume and global reach of actions by alcohol and ultra-processed food industries demonstrate the need to advance international efforts to establish principles of engagement and manage conflict of interest. (Ralston et al 2020; Severi et al 2020)
- Secondly, and relatedly, there is a clear **need to develop mechanisms to support civil society organisations** in managing their interactions with commercial sector actors. A number of respondents highlighted concerns about how, in the context of major and growing resource constraints, charities and NGOs lacked tools to ensure that any funding or collaborations did not undermine core elements of their respective missions.
- This highlights the wider importance of **ensuring that initiatives to address the pandemic are coherent with related health and development priorities**, notably including effectively tackling NCDs. This imperative raises important questions for governments and for international organisations about their interactions with unhealthy commodity industries.
- Crucially, this also requires that responses to the emergent economic crisis and funding constraints are shaped by a **commitment to build back better**, rather than by succumbing to industry pressure to adopt approaches to taxation, trade and regulation that have long proven damaging to health and development.

Alongside industry efforts to shape policy environments, there are promising signs that some governments are beginning to respond to the pandemic in innovative ways that can address the interactions between infectious disease and NCDs, including measures to regulate and incentivise change among unhealthy commodity industries. The French government announced **policies to incentivise active transport** to constrain the risk of spiralling air pollution levels as lockdown lifted and commuting increased; the Netherlands is similarly attaching **environmental conditions to recovery subsidies offered to air-lines**. The UK government's launch of a new obesity strategy has been explicitly framed with reference to COVID-19, while the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Tabasco have recently banned sales of foods and beverages high in salt, sugar and fat to children among **legislative changes** justified with reference to the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on those living with obesity and other diet related NCDs. And South Africa's introduction of sales restrictions on tobacco and alcohol during lockdown has stimulated ongoing discussions about innovative approaches to regulating health and social harms.

While this report paints a concerning picture of unhealthy commodity industry-driven obstacles to developing effective health policies and preventing NCDs, COVID-19 has also provided global health with an unprecedented prominence. The pandemic is powerfully illuminating an important policy window, and this is far too significant to allow unhealthy commodity industries to define the agenda moving forward. Monitoring and countering their efforts to do so is therefore essential to developing approaches to health and sustainable development that can build back better for all.

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About the SPECTRUM CONSORTIUM

SPECTRUM is a unique collaboration that aims to conduct research to prevent and address harm to health from unhealthy commodities by using systems science to identify and evaluate solutions. SPECTRUM is a multi-university, multi-agency research consortium focused on the commercial determinants of health and health inequalities which is funded by the UK Prevention Research Partnership through grant reference MR/S037519/1. UKPRP is an initiative funded by the UK Research and Innovation Councils, the Department of Health and Social Care (England) and the UK devolved administrations, and leading health research charities.

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/spectrum>



About the NCD Alliance

The NCD Alliance (NCDA) is a unique civil society network of 2,000 organisations in 170 countries, dedicated to improving NCD prevention and control worldwide. Our network includes NCDA members, national and regional NCD alliances, scientific and professional associations, and academic and research institutions. Together with strategic partners, including WHO, the UN and governments, NCDA is transforming the global fight against NCDs.

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