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GÃ3mez, Eduardo J. - Lehigh University, and Fenster, Lanie - Lehigh University. *The Commercial Determinants of Health in the Context of COVID 19*. 10 Oct. 2023, <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/lehigh-scholarship/faculty-staff-publications/health-policy-pol-health-policy-6>.

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# The Commercial Determinants of Health in the Context of COVID 19

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**Abstract:** One of the major public health side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was its contribution to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and their associated risk factors such as obesity. At the same time, public health researchers became increasingly cognizant of how the commercial determinants of health contributed to this challenge. In this article, we contribute to this literature by discussing how major beverage and fast-food companies took advantage of this situation through a variety of strategies that essentially increased their profits at a time of worsening COVID-19 and NCD conditions. Despite overwhelming data highlighting worsening NCD and obesity problems, governments did not recognize this situation and introduce policies limiting industries from taking advantage of the pandemic situation. We conclude by providing several concrete political and policy actions that political leaders can take to avoid this situation in the future.

## Introduction

Within the past 2-3 decades, scholars and policymakers have become increasingly interested in the commercial determinants of health (CDoH). At its core, CDoH discusses the various ways through which major corporations—from soft drinks to gambling, social media, tobacco, and alcohol—influence our health. There has been evidence suggesting a correlation between the rise and prosperity of these industries and their harmful effects on population health, such as non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and their associated risk factors, e.g., obesity and type-2 diabetes. This association has kindled a large body of research and even the creation of university courses and programs that are focused on the commercial determinants of health.

However, in this article we wish to address the relationship between CDoH and the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, how did this pandemic facilitate industries' ability to affect our health and wellbeing? Did lockdowns and business closures, for example, create more venues for industries to market and sell their products? Did these industries target specific socioeconomic groups and demographics when advertising and selling their products? Have governments recognized these trends and done anything about it?

In this article, we argue that industries took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their interests and products. When compared to pre-pandemic levels, marketing and sales of sodas and unhealthy fast foods burgeoned, especially in developing nations. Moreover, marketing and sales have, it seems, disproportionately affected children and the poor in these countries. Although several countries have been vocal proponents of addressing NCDs, their risk factors, such as obesity, have only gotten worse since the

pandemic emerged. Nevertheless, we find that governments have done little to deepen their commitment to regulating the commercial sector and its impact on our health.

## Methodology

In this article, we took a qualitative methodological approach to research. That is, we based our analysis on the usage of secondary qualitative data obtained from documents, such as peer-reviewed books, journal articles, policy reports, and media articles. We obtained this qualitative data through on-line search engines, such as *Google*. When searching for relevant documents, we used key word search terms, such as “COVID 19” and “NCDs” and “junk food.” Our research for this article started in July 2022 and concluded in March 2023.

## COVID-19 and NCDs

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading causes of death, disease and disability worldwide. These diseases contribute to over 70% of global annual death rates, with the most common being cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes.<sup>2</sup> One’s likelihood of experiencing an NCD depends on numerous risk factors including behavioral, economic, environmental, and the social determinants of health. An individual is at a higher risk of developing an NCD if they engage in harmful behaviors, such as tobacco use, unhealthy eating habits, lack of physical activity, and alcohol abuse. Other risk factors include growing global urbanization (which may affect physical activity and diet, and more people living in heavily polluted environments), poverty and economic inequalities (which result in limited access to resources to maintain a healthy lifestyle), and biological factors such as genetics, age, and sex.<sup>3</sup>

In 2015, the World Health Organization estimated that 200 million people in North and South America were living with NCDs, and that if the modifiable risk factors, such as tobacco use, poor diet, insufficient physical inactivity, and alcohol use, were eliminated, 80% of all heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes would be prevented and over 40% of cancer would be prevented.<sup>4</sup> The United States ranks 12th in the world for obesity, and approximately 36.9% of American adults over the age of 20 were considered obese, according to 2015-2016 data.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> www.paho.org. (n.d.). *Noncommunicable Diseases - PAHO/WHO* | Pan American Health Organization. [online] Available at: [https://www.paho.org/en/topics/noncommunicable-diseases#:~:text=Noncommunicable%20diseases%20\(NCDs\)%20kill%2041](https://www.paho.org/en/topics/noncommunicable-diseases#:~:text=Noncommunicable%20diseases%20(NCDs)%20kill%2041).

<sup>3</sup> Jan 29, P. and 2019 (2019). *The U.S. Government and Global Non-Communicable Disease Efforts*. [online] KFF. Available at: <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/the-u-s-government-and-global-non-communicable-diseases/#:~:text=Impact>.

<sup>4</sup> paho.org. (n.d.). *Non-communicable Diseases in the Americas: All sectors of society can help solve the problem*. [online] Available at: <https://www.paho.org/hq/dmdocuments/2011/paho-policy-brief-1-En-web1.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> worldpopulationreview.com. (2022). *Obesity Rate by State 2020*. [online] Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/obesity-rate-by-state>.

These alarming numbers can be heavily accredited to the rise of Big Food and Soda companies. According to a 2021 analysis conducted by *The Guardian* and *Food and Water Watch*, a small number of corporations have a significant influence on the majority of groceries purchased by Americans, accounting for almost 80% of the market share.<sup>6</sup> The study examined various products such as breakfast pastries, chips, soda, meat and animal products, and revealed that in most cases, only four corporations controlled the majority of the market.<sup>7</sup> Processed foods make up around 70% of the average American diet.<sup>8</sup> In terms of sugary drinks, in 2020 *Coca-Cola* and *PepsiCo* produce more than half of all soda consumed globally, and sales are especially on the rise in developing countries.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, Big Food and Soda companies have begun heavily investing in vulnerable, developing countries, marketing themselves as affordable options for meals, especially in regions of food insecurity. However, many of these countries are, in turn, reporting higher rates of obesity and other NCDs. The diets of humans globally are increasingly driven by several multinational food companies that primarily focus on maximizing profits rather than focusing on providing sufficient, nutritional options that can reduce the prevalence of NCDs.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the situation has not improved, as the frequency of NCDs is currently on the rise. This can be accredited to two main reasons. First, COVID-19 has been a catalyst for destructive, modifiable risk factors. Global stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, unemployment, online learning, and business closures are among a few of the numerous contributions to inactivity. A study published in England in late 2021 concluded that nationwide physical activity levels were 30% lower in the year 2020 compared to the levels of the population from 2016 to 2019.<sup>10</sup> Fitbit reported that within the first ten days of COVID-19's pandemic status, the United States saw a 12% decrease in step counts.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, now that people were staying home, the methods of obtaining food changed for many, resulting in an increased use of food delivery services (i.e., Doordash, UberEats, GrubHub, etc.). These services greatly benefited from the

<sup>6</sup> Walsh, O. (2022). *The Big Problem with Big Food*. [online] The Humane League. Available at: <https://thehumaneleague.org/article/big-food#:~:text=Monopolization%20of%20the%20food%20sector&text=%22It's%20widely%20agreed%20that%20consumers.%2C%22%20according%20to%20the%20researchers>

<sup>7</sup> Walsh, O. (2022). *The Big Problem with Big Food*. [online] The Humane League. Available at: <https://thehumaneleague.org/article/big-food#:~:text=Monopolization%20of%20the%20food%20sector&text=%22It's%20widely%20agreed%20that%20consumers.%2C%22%20according%20to%20the%20researchers..>

<sup>8</sup> Ryssdal, K. (2013). *Processed foods make up 70 percent of the U.S. diet - Marketplace*. [online] Marketplace. Available at: <https://www.marketplace.org/2013/03/12/processed-foods-make-70-percent-us-diet/>.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Wood, Phil Baker, Gyorgy Scrinis, David McCoy, Owain Williams, and Gary Sacks. 2021. "Maximising the Wealth of Few at the Expense of the Health of Many: A Public Health Analysis of Market Power and Corporate Wealth in Income Distribution in the Global Soft Drink Market," *Globalization and Health* 17(138).

<sup>10</sup> Strain, T., Sharp, S.J., Spiers, A., Price, H., Williams, C., Fraser, C., Brage, S., Wijndaele, K. and Kelly, P. (2021). Population level physical activity before and during the first national COVID-19 lockdown: A nationally representative repeat cross-sectional study of 5 years of Active Lives data in England. *The Lancet Regional Health - Europe*, [online] 12, p.100265. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2021.100265>.

<sup>11</sup> Fitbit Blog. (2020). *The Impact Of Coronavirus On Global Activity*. [online] Available at: <https://blog.fitbit.com/covid-19-global-activity/>.

pandemic. Since 2019, global installs of these applications increased by 25% in 2020, and 21% more in 2021.<sup>12</sup> While these installation rates are significant, rates of in-app use are even more remarkable. Global food delivery through these apps increased by 88% in 2020 (compared to 2019), and another 43% in 2021.<sup>13</sup> In North America specifically, these rates were even higher, with 122% more use in 2020, and 45% more in 2021.<sup>14</sup>

With more people ordering, higher volumes of fast foods and heavily-processed foods were being consumed. Along with this, alcohol consumption has increased during the pandemic, as a survey of U.S. adults showed that excessive drinking increased by 21%.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, like these junk foods, it appears that alcohol consumption increased during the pandemic when people were staying at home more often. Furthermore, scientists predict that this increase in alcohol consumption will result in “8,000 additional deaths from alcohol-related liver disease, 18,700 cases of liver failure, and 1,000 cases of liver cancer by 2040. In the short term, alcohol consumption changes due to COVID-19 are expected to cause 100 additional deaths and 2,800 additional cases of liver failure by 2023.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, smoking behavior was heavily altered during the pandemic. A survey regarding smoking habits in relation to COVID-19 was administered in May 2020 by the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Tobacco Research and Treatment Center. The survey included current and former daily smokers who had been hospitalized prior to the pandemic and had previously participated in a smoking cessation clinical trial at hospitals in Massachusetts, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania.<sup>17</sup> 32% of respondents reported an increase in smoking, 37% decreased, and 31% remain unchanged.<sup>18</sup> The increase in smoking could

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<sup>12</sup> Wetzler, T. (2021). *Food delivery apps continue to thrive following COVID-19-driven growth* | Adjust. [online] www.adjust.com. Available at: <https://www.adjust.com/blog/food-delivery-apps-thrive-following-covid-growth/>.

<sup>13</sup> Wetzler, T. (2021). *Food delivery apps continue to thrive following COVID-19-driven growth* | Adjust. [online] www.adjust.com. Available at: <https://www.adjust.com/blog/food-delivery-apps-thrive-following-covid-growth/>.

<sup>14</sup> Wetzler, T. (2021). *Food delivery apps continue to thrive following COVID-19-driven growth* | Adjust. [online] www.adjust.com. Available at: <https://www.adjust.com/blog/food-delivery-apps-thrive-following-covid-growth/>.

<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts General Hospital. (n.d.). *Alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic projected to cause more liver disease and deaths*. [online] Available at: <https://www.massgeneral.org/news/press-release/Alcohol-consumption-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-projected-to-cause-more-liver-disease-and-deaths#:~:text=A%20one%2Dyear%20increase%20in>.

<sup>16</sup> Massachusetts General Hospital. (n.d.). *Alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic projected to cause more liver disease and deaths*, page 1. [online] Available at: <https://www.massgeneral.org/news/press-release/Alcohol-consumption-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-projected-to-cause-more-liver-disease-and-deaths#:~:text=A%20one%2Dyear%20increase%20in>

<sup>17</sup> Cunningham, J. (2021). *Study reveals changes in cigarette smoking during the COVID-19 pandemic*. [online] massgeneral.org. Available at: <https://www.massgeneral.org/news/press-release/study-reveals-changes-in-cigarette-smoking-during-the-covid-19%20pandemic>.

<sup>18</sup> Cunningham, J. (2021). *Study reveals changes in cigarette smoking during the COVID-19 pandemic*. [online] massgeneral.org. Available at: <https://www.massgeneral.org/news/press-release/study-reveals-changes-in-cigarette-smoking-during-the-covid-19%20pandemic>.

be attributed to boredom and stress as a product of the pandemic, and the decrease could be due to the fear of catching COVID-19 and experiencing more severe side effects.<sup>19</sup>

The United States has seen a significant rise in NCDs since before the pandemic. A March 2021 American Psychological Association survey found that participants gained an average of 30 pounds of extra weight since the start of the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> An August 2021 study found that obesity rates in children between the ages of 5 and 11 increased by 9% in those few months (from 36% to 35%).<sup>21</sup> In February 2022, researchers found that rates of conditions, such as heart failure and stroke, were significantly more frequent in individuals who had contracted and recovered from COVID-19 compared to similar individuals who had not.<sup>22</sup> The study compared 150,000 individuals who survived COVID-19 infection and two groups of uninfected individuals.<sup>23</sup> The survivors showed remarkable increases in 20 cardiovascular problems over the year following infection.<sup>24</sup> They were 52% more likely to have had a stroke compared to the control groups, and the risk of heart failure rose by 72%.<sup>25</sup>

However, what role(s) did the commercial sector play in contributing to these NCD challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic? How, specifically, did they take advantage of the pandemic to advance their interests and profitability? And what can governments do about this? The next couple of sections explain.

## Industry Sales and Marketing Strategies During the Pandemic

For several decades, scholars have been following the rise and influence of major corporate entities. Since the advent of economic globalization through neoliberalism (i.e., increased trade and investment) beginning in the 1990s, major food and beverage companies have increased their investments in countries around the world, especially in developing nations.<sup>26</sup> The soft drink and ultra-processed foods sectors, for example, have seen the Global South as a wonderful opportunity to advance their products and sales. Indeed, recent

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<sup>19</sup> Cunningham, J. (2021). *Study reveals changes in cigarette smoking during the COVID-19 pandemic*. [online] massgeneral.org. Available at: <https://www.massgeneral.org/news/press-release/study-reveals-changes-in-cigarette-smoking-during-the-covid-19%20pandemic>.

<sup>20</sup> www.beaumont.org. (n.d.). *Has the Pandemic Affected Obesity Rates?* [online] Available at: <https://www.beaumont.org/health-wellness/blogs/has-the-pandemic-affected-obesity-rates>.

<sup>21</sup> www.beaumont.org. (n.d.). *Has the Pandemic Affected Obesity Rates?* [online] Available at: <https://www.beaumont.org/health-wellness/blogs/has-the-pandemic-affected-obesity-rates>.

<sup>22</sup> Heart-disease risk soars after COVID — even with a mild case. (2022). *Nature*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00403-0>.

<sup>23</sup> Heart-disease risk soars after COVID — even with a mild case. (2022). *Nature*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00403-0>.

<sup>24</sup> Heart-disease risk soars after COVID — even with a mild case. (2022). *Nature*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00403-0>.

<sup>25</sup> Heart-disease risk soars after COVID — even with a mild case. (2022). *Nature*. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00403-0>.

<sup>26</sup> Eduardo J. Gómez. 2023. *Junk Food Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

research by Allyn Taylor and Michael Jacobson<sup>27</sup> reveals that major soft drink companies, such as *Coca-Cola* and *Pepsi*, have invested in several developing nations. In addition to increasing their financial investments, soda industries have also sought to influence the domestic political and social context in their favor, in turn finding ways to influence policy and society so that they may continue to prosper.<sup>28</sup>

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, industries responded in a strategic manner, taking advantage of a context of crisis --as had been seen in the past--<sup>29</sup> by engaging in several good will acts in order to bolster their social reputation and profits. These good will acts are commonly known as corporate social responsibility activities (CSR). Often emerging in response to public criticism of industry's harms to society, by engaging in CSR activities, businesses can increase their reputation of giving back to society, with some in fact viewing these acts as industry's moral obligation,<sup>30</sup> while also being viewed as genuine partners with government in addressing social needs and challenges. In the United States, for example, *PEPSI Co.* worked with health officials or local governments to establish COVID-19 testing sites.<sup>31</sup> And *Coca-Cola* provided donations to vulnerable populations and health systems during the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> Despite these efforts, scholars note that we should not ignore how these industries have also negatively influenced health policy when not in the public spotlight.<sup>33</sup> *PEPSI Co.*'s provision of testing sites is emblematic of the myriad of good-willed CSR activities that the food and beverage sector engage in a time of crisis to bolster their reputation and secure profitability. These kinds of activities were on display throughout the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> Furthermore, during this time some underscored the irony of food industries positioning themselves as helping safeguard the public's health while at the same time selling products

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<sup>27</sup> Allyn Taylor and Michael Jacobson. 2016. *Carbonating the World: The Marketing and Health Impact of Sugar Drinks in Low- and Middle-Income Countries* (Washington DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest).

<sup>28</sup> Eduardo J. Gómez. 2023. *Junk Food Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

<sup>29</sup> May CI van Schalkwyk, Nason Maani, and Martin McKee. 2020. "Public Health Emergency or Opportunity to Profit? The Two Faces of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Lancet*; [http://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587\(21\)00001-2](http://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(21)00001-2)

<sup>30</sup> Tjidde Tempels, Marcel Verweij, and Vincent Blok. 2017. "Big Food's Ambivalence: Seeking Profit and Responsibility for Health," *American Journal of Public Health* 107(3): 402-406.

<sup>31</sup> Global Health Advocacy Incubator. 2020. Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID 19.

<sup>32</sup> May CI van Schalkwyk, Nason Maani, and Martin McKee. 2020. "Public Health Emergency or Opportunity to Profit? The Two Faces of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Lancet*; [http://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587\(21\)00001-2](http://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(21)00001-2)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Limb. 2020. "Covid-19: Food and Drink Companies are Exploiting Pandemic to Further Their Brands, Analysis Finds," *BMJ*; 370.

<sup>35</sup> See also Food Policies: In Times of COVID-19 and Beyond. 2021. *The Lancet*, May 7; published on-line; DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587\(21\)00123-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(21)00123-6).

that undermined the public's health.<sup>36</sup> Some remind us that despite these CSR activities we have to recall that companies providing these activities, such as *Coca-Cola*, spent years striving to thwart the WHO and U.S. Centers for Disease Control's efforts to reduce the global obesity epidemic.<sup>37</sup>

The food and beverage industry has also taken advantage of the COVID-19 situation to increase the reach and sale of their products, especially in developing nations.<sup>38</sup> For example, the pandemic saw a burgeoning growth of television, radio, and on-line marketing of their products. It seems as if this was done in order to take advantage of individuals facing several weeks of quarantine. With more individuals in lockdown, fast food companies ramped up their drive-through, take out, and home delivery options.<sup>39</sup> Particularly in developing nations, during the pandemic there was also an increase in consumer demand for e-commerce products.<sup>40</sup> Major food retailers and fast food companies were pivoting to meet this growing e-commerce demand and providing home deliveries.<sup>41</sup> Research found that major food companies used strategies such as appealing to consumer nostalgia.<sup>42</sup> For instance, *McDonald's* in Colombia advertised statements hinting at missing their products while suggesting that they could still be ordered online through apps.<sup>43</sup> Analysts found that *Burger King* ramped up its on-line apps and encouraged that people should stay home and reward themselves with a burger.<sup>44</sup>

In other instances, industry used "cause marketing campaigns," revealing how consumers of their products could contribute to charitable causes and helped consumers "feel good about contributing to a social cause, even when buying unhealthy products;"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Lucy Westerman's discussion of this point in Matthew Limb. 2020. "Covid-19: Food and Drink Companies are Exploiting Pandemic to Further Their Brands, Analysis Finds," *BMJ*; 370.

<sup>37</sup> May CI van Schalkwyk, Nason Maani, and Martin McKee. 2020. "Public Health Emergency or Opportunity to Profit? The Two Faces of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Lancet*; [http://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587\(21\)00001-2](http://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(21)00001-2)

<sup>38</sup> *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*. Global Health Advocacy Incubator.

<sup>39</sup> Nina Trentmann and Mark Maurer. 2020. "Fast-Food Chains See Shifts Made During Pandemic Paying Off," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 29.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Reardon, Amir Heiman, Liang Lu, Chandra S.R. Nuthalapati, Rob Vos, and David Zilberman. 2021. "Pivoting? by Food Industry Firms to Cope with COVID-19 in Developing Nations: E-Commerce and 'Coping' Delivery Intermediaries," *Agricultural Economics*, DOI: 10.1111/agec.12631.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Reardon, Amir Heiman, Liang Lu, Chandra S.R. Nuthalapati, Rob Vos, and David Zilberman. 2021. "Pivoting? by Food Industry Firms to Cope with COVID-19 in Developing Nations: E-Commerce and 'Coping' Delivery Intermediaries," *Agricultural Economics*, DOI: 10.1111/agec.12631.

<sup>42</sup> *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*. Global Health Advocacy Incubator.

<sup>43</sup> *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*. Global Health Advocacy Incubator.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew Limb. 2020. "Covid-19: Food and Drink Companies are Exploiting Pandemic to Further Their Brands, Analysis Finds," *BMJ*; 370.

<sup>45</sup> *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*. Global Health Advocacy Incubator, p.12.



*Burger King*, for example, promised to allocate a portion of their sandwich sales to Brazil's public health system during the pandemic.<sup>46</sup> During this time it was also found that major corporations were advertising their products as necessary for strengthening the immune system and that their ultra-processed foods were free of infection.<sup>47</sup> *Kraft Heinz's* northern European division at the time was committed to helping strengthen peoples' immune system.<sup>48</sup> *Kraft Heinz* also realized that they had not emphasized to consumers the health benefits of their products, such as beans.<sup>49</sup>

## Government Response

But how did governments respond to this vexing situation? Since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, did governments decide to take on the power and interests of major food and beverage industries? Or did governments acquiesce, yet again, to industries' political, economic, and social influence?

Unfortunately, it seems that COVID-19 did not instigate a heightened government effort to reduce industry's influence over politics and policy. To our knowledge, in recent years few nations have enacted concrete legislation limiting the marketing and sale of sugary sweetened beverages and ultra-processed foods.<sup>50</sup> As Gómez (2023) maintains,<sup>51</sup> this occurred despite the introduction of several national soda taxes *prior to* the pandemic, as seen in Mexico, India, South Africa, and Chile. This fiscal momentum should have carried over to advertising, sales, and food labeling regulations. Thus, it seems that despite the overwhelming evidence that NCDs and their risk factors increased during the pandemic, and that food and beverage industries took advantage of the situation, this did not kindle a stronger government policy response in most countries.

However, in some cases political leaders have recognized the harms that junk foods posed during the pandemic. In Mexico, for example, *Coca-Cola* has dominated the soft drink market since the 1970s. This was aided by the fact that one of Mexico's former presidents, Vicente Fox, was a Latin America regional *Coca-Cola* executive prior to becoming president. Despite *Coca-Cola* being firmly embedded within Mexican politics and culture (in some areas, the soda has been incorporated into religious ceremonies),<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*. Global Health Advocacy Incubator.

<sup>47</sup> *Facing Two Pandemics: How Big Food Undermined Public Health in the Era of COVID-19*. Global Health Advocacy Incubator.

<sup>48</sup> Simon Harvey. 2021. "How Might Lessons Learnt from COVID Influence Food Company Strategy?" *Food Magazine*, April 6.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Harvey. 2021. "How Might Lessons Learnt from COVID Influence Food Company Strategy?" *Food Magazine*, April 6.

<sup>50</sup> Eduardo J. Gómez. 2023. *Junk Food Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

<sup>51</sup> Eduardo J. Gómez. 2023. *Junk Food Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

<sup>52</sup> Jessica Tyler. 2018. "There's a Church in Mexico Where Coca-Cola is used in Religious Ceremonies," *Insider*, August 2; <https://www.businessinsider.com/coca-cola-church-in-mexico-uses-coke-religious-ceremonies-2018-8>

recently President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, aka, “Amlo,” publicly stated that *Coca-Cola* is bad for your health.<sup>53</sup> What’s more, Amlo even applauded the famous world soccer player, Christian Ronaldo, for publicly removing a couple of *Coca-Cola* bottles from his table during a press conference in 2021.<sup>54</sup> This public declaration appears to suggest a critical shift in the government’s relationship with *Coca-Cola*, while recognizing that in a time of public health crisis, ensuring that the public eats well and that people strengthen their immune system is a priority. What this situation also suggests is that we should remain optimistic that Mexico and other governments can eventually decide to pursue more stringent regulatory legislation against powerful corporate entities.

In the U.K., Prime Minister Boris Johnson also appeared to have noticed the role of junk foods in making the COVID-19 situation worse for the general public. After recovering from the virus, some claim that Johnson publicly acknowledged how his obese condition played a role in his experience with the virus.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, according to Helena Bottemiller Evich of *POLITICO*, Johnson claimed at the time that “When I went into ICU, when I was really ill ... I was way overweight.”<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, Johnson then worked with policymakers to ensure a ban on TV junk food advertising before 9pm, a requirement that restaurants include calories on their menus and that stores provide healthy foods in checkout lines.<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately, analysts note that no such government awareness and response emerged in the U.S. linking COVID-19 to diet and disease.<sup>58</sup> This is troubling if one considers the ongoing challenge of obesity, type-2 diabetes, and the prevalence of food deserts in low-income neighborhoods throughout the U.S.. Nevertheless, signs of presidential awareness and concern in Mexico and the U.K. give hope that other countries are realizing the linkages between COVID-19 and the commercial determinants of health. This is certainly a lesson that U.S. policymakers can learn from.

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<sup>53</sup> *Pulse News Mexico*. 2022. “AMLO Wages War ... on Coca-Cola,” December 8; [https://pulsenewsmexico.com/2022/12/08/amlo-wages-war-on-coca-cola/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=amlo-wages-war-on-coca-cola](https://pulsenewsmexico.com/2022/12/08/amlo-wages-war-on-coca-cola/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=amlo-wages-war-on-coca-cola)

<sup>54</sup> Infobae. 2021. “Tengan para que aprendan:” AMLO aplaude gesto de Cristiano Ronaldo contra Coca Cola,” July 8; <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2021/07/08/tengan-para-que-aprendan-amlo-aplaude-gesto-de-cristiano-ronaldo-contra-coca-cola/>

<sup>55</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich. 2021. “Diet-related Diseases Pose a Major Risk for COVID-19. But the U.S. Overlooks Them,” *POLITICO*, October 31; <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/31/covid-deaths-diet-diseases-nutrition-america-517076>

<sup>56</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich. 2021. “Diet-related Diseases Pose a Major Risk for COVID-19. But the U.S. Overlooks Them,” *POLITICO*, October 31; <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/31/covid-deaths-diet-diseases-nutrition-america-517076>

<sup>57</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich. 2021. “Diet-related Diseases Pose a Major Risk for COVID-19. But the U.S. Overlooks Them,” *POLITICO*, October 31; <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/31/covid-deaths-diet-diseases-nutrition-america-517076>

<sup>58</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich. 2021. “Diet-related Diseases Pose a Major Risk for COVID-19. But the U.S. Overlooks Them,” *POLITICO*, October 31; <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/31/covid-deaths-diet-diseases-nutrition-america-517076>

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic affected our health, politics, and society in many ways. However, we have not thoroughly explored how the pandemic was shaped and taken advantage of by the commercial determinants of health. In this article, we have expressed the fact that major beverage and fast-food establishments took advantage of the pandemic to advance their positions and profits. Unfortunately, this occurred at a time when NCDs and their associated risk factors, such as obesity, burgeoned. One can certainly argue that public policy measures recommended (or in some cases, mandated) to safeguard the public from the virus, such as quarantine and lockdown, eventually contributed to NCDs challenges by making sedentary individuals more vulnerable to alcohol, soda, and fast-food advertising. Safeguarding the public's health from COVID-19 had the ironic consequence of in some instances *worsening* the public's health.

Going forward, what can governments do to ensure that this never happens again? More specifically, with respect to policy, what can national and state governments do to ensure that major beverage and food industries do not take advantage of health pandemics and prioritize their profits over the public's health?

First, political leaders can decide not to partner with these industries to provide healthcare and other related social services. While industries may be well intentioned, the problem is that these types of partnerships may help to legitimize industry, build social legitimacy and support, and in the process incentivize politicians not to pursue regulations on marketing and sales.<sup>59</sup> Second, political leaders can provide public awareness campaigns about the importance of eating well and avoiding unhealthy foods. These public health messages should be an integral part of the government's public health recommendations. Furthermore, it may be a good idea to specify which kinds of food products are harmful to individual health and recommend avoiding them. Finally, if governments recommend or mandate home lockdowns, introducing legislation that prohibits the advertising of unhealthy foods during this period should be considered. These can be temporary measures with the goal of ensuring that stressed and vulnerable individuals are not overwhelmed with junk food advertising.

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<sup>59</sup> Eduardo J. Gómez. 2023. *Junk Food Politics* (Johns Hopkins University Press).