



Facing Two Pandemics

How Big Food
Undermined
Public Health
in the Era
of COVID-19



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Executive Summary

The Big Food marketing strategies appealed to consumers' vulnerability during the lockdown to promote junk food as an elixir for tough times.

Despite growing evidence of the need to adopt healthy diets, the COVID-19 pandemic generated a unique opportunity for the food and beverage industry to thrive in low-to middle-income countries. During the crisis, multinationals such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nestlé, among others, quickly promoted unhealthy, ultra-processed foods and sugary drinks.

These companies engaged in multiple marketing strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, appealing to sentiments like nostalgia and comfort as people around the world quarantined at home. Healthy food policy advocates expressed concern about such food industry activities, including:

- **Coupling “solidarity actions” with aggressive marketing of junk food and sugary drink brands, which helped polish corporate images (nutri-washingⁱ);**
- **Positioning ultra-processed food and drinks as “essential products” when they are not healthy foods;**
- **Carrying out philanthropic actions while actively lobbying against healthy food policies; and**
- **Donating ultra-processed food and drinks to vulnerable populations, including to children in school programs and to other low-income populations, contributing to worsening health conditions like obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease and exacerbating undernutrition with nutritionally poor foods and beverages.**

The Big Food marketing strategies appealed to consumers' vulnerability during the lockdown to promote junk food as an elixir for tough times. Employees, frontline workers, and a public looking for support and hope found an industry promoting their products as a source of comfort. In this challenging moment where disinfection and food safety were top

ⁱ **Nutri-washing:** an industry practice relating a product with healthy or beneficial characteristics, while they have no nutritional value, and in reality, are harmful to health. This mechanism allows the industry to better position its narrative before the public, emphasizing that Big Food and ultra-processed products (UPP) can be positive for health, in order to avoid government regulations.

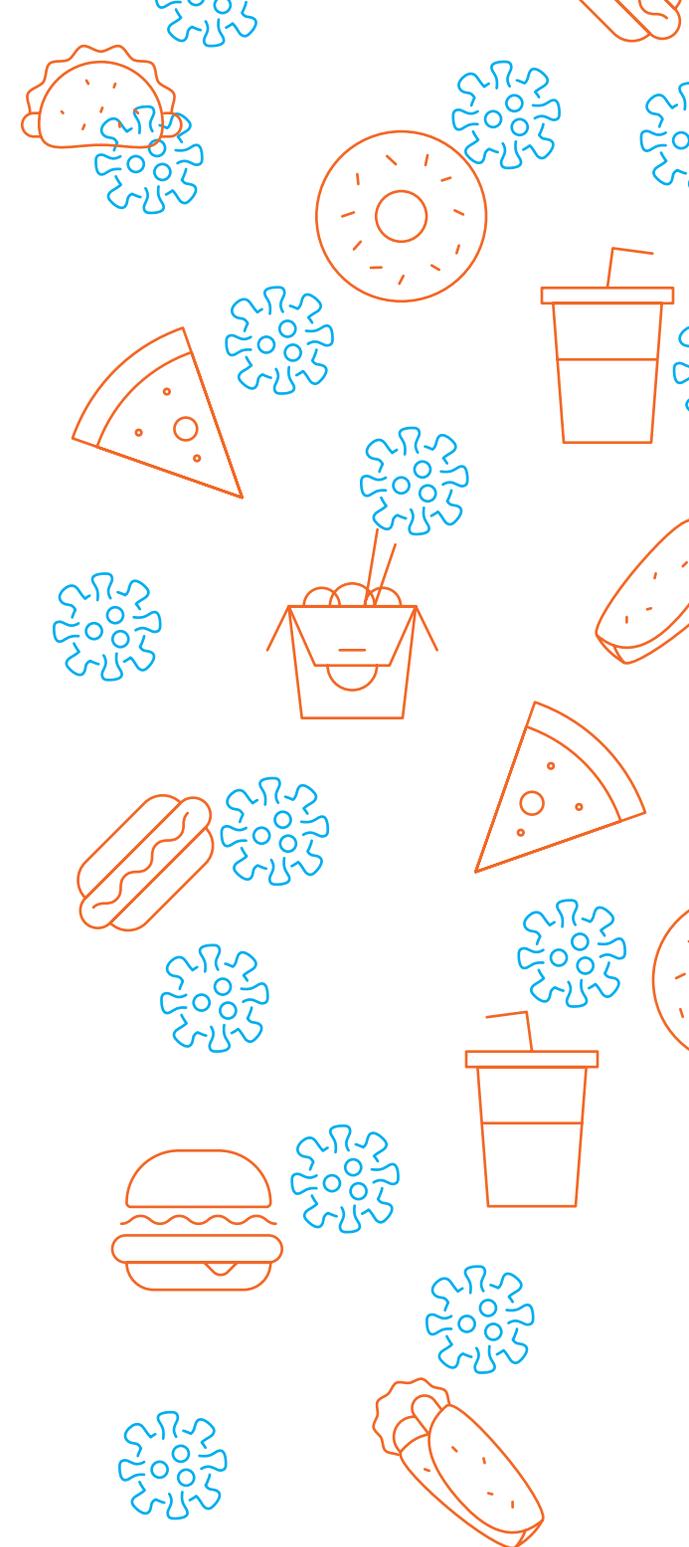


concerns, the industry associated “food safety” with “healthy food.” This deceptive message helped to position unhealthy food and drink as safe and vital for household consumption. The industry also enhanced its role as an essential player in the food system by highlighting its commitment to uninterrupted distribution.

While corporate social responsibility (CSR) can benefit communities, the food and beverage industry leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to create alliances with public entities and civil society, which directly or indirectly advanced their interests. Their response to the food needs of the most vulnerable populations in developing countries, many still struggling with increased social needs and negative economic impact, was to donate unhealthy packaged foods and sugary drinks. They also donated and promoted baby formula, a breach of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes because it discourages breastfeeding and affects early childhood nutrition.¹

As COVID-19 spread globally, data emerged that people with obesity and diet-related diseases were more susceptible to complications and death from COVID-19. Countries already fighting an obesity epidemic faced the threat of a sicker population and higher rates of mortality. The pandemic also highlighted how policies aiming to create healthier food environments, such as front-of-package warning labels, healthy school food policies, marketing restrictions, and taxes on junk food and sugary drinks all could have helped consumers to make healthier food choices during this critical time.

This report documents how food and beverage industry giants exploited COVID-19 to further an image of themselves as good corporate citizens. It also underscores how weak conflict-of-interest protocols and the lack of healthy food regulations in some countries left the door open for the industry to undermine advances in healthy food policy. Finally, the report offers recommendations to governments and civil society for protecting the right to adequate, healthy food. Governments are called to regulate food assistance programs during emergencies, to guarantee conflict-free policymaking scenarios, and to implement healthy food policies based on international recommendations.



Countries with high rates of obesity and diet-related diseases fought the pandemic with a huge liability: a vulnerable population more susceptible to complications, and even death, from COVID-19 than those with healthier weights and diets.

Introduction

Within weeks of the World Health Organization (WHO) pronouncing COVID-19 as a pandemic, the ultra-processed food and drink industry began to build a narrative positioning itself as critical to the solution and to aggressively invest in public-private initiatives between governments and civil society organizations (CSO).

Ultra-processed foods and drinks, defined as industrially manufactured ready-to-heat-and-eat foods, have grown in availability over the past 25 years, especially in low- and middle-income countries.² Most contain low nutritional value with high levels of sugar, sodium and fat.³ They are associated with higher odds of obesity, higher cardiovascular disease incidence and higher all-cause mortality.^{4,5} Ultra-processed products (UPPs) are widely distributed by major-multinational companies such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nestlé, among others. These corporations, here referred to as Big Food, are largely unregulated, and their products include packaged savory and salty snacks and cookies; sugar-sweetened beverages; packaged candy; ready-to-heat meals and fast food meals.

Countries with high rates of obesity and diet-related diseases fought the pandemic with a huge liability: a vulnerable population more susceptible to complications, and even death, from COVID-19 than those with healthier weights and diets.⁶ Globally, countries were already facing a growing obesity epidemic caused by unhealthy diets. Since 1975 obesity rates have nearly tripled, and in most countries more people die from being overweight than from being underweight.⁷ People with obesity, diabetes or cardiovascular disease are at greater risk of experiencing complications from COVID-19

than people without these conditions,^{8,9,10} all of which created an increased burden of disease for countries with high rates of diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).¹¹ In addition, the disruption of food systems and economic downturn due to the pandemic have exacerbated malnutrition in many low and middle income countries. Malnourished children are also at increased risk of COVID-19 and its complications as their immune systems are compromised.^{12,13} This trend further highlights the need to provide children access to healthy and nutritious food that both prevent malnutrition and excessive weight gain. This is often referred to as double duty actions.^{14,15}

In short, through aggressive promotion of unhealthy products, the Big Food companies already contributing to rising rates of obesity and diet-related diseases exploited COVID-19 to position themselves and their products as “essential” to the solution, placing populations at higher risk of coronavirus morbidity and mortality. Their ability to permeate the market with their messages and unhealthy products underscores the urgent need for healthy food policies. In the short-term, measures such as front-of-package warning labels could have equipped consumers to quickly identify healthy food choices and helped civil organizations and governments to monitor food donations. Marketing and school environment regulations would have better protected children and vulnerable populations from deceptive and misleading information. In the long-term, these policies and regulations can help fight obesity and diet-related diseases by creating healthier food environments.



By qualitatively analyzing the messages and the companies' overall response, this narrative highlights how major global food and beverage companies positioned their brands during COVID-19 and how these global campaigns were mirrored in diverse countries and regions.

Methodology

From March to July 2020 during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAi) collected from 18 countries more than 280 examples of industry actions with the potential to interfere in the development and implementation of healthy food policies. In addition to traditional responses to national and international disasters by Big Food, this paper identifies new ways the food and beverage industry used this vulnerable global moment to further its own agenda. This is a multi-method study that includes ground-truthing, a narrative analysis, social listening and media monitoring.

Data of country-specific and global industry interference were collected through ongoing media monitoring and social listening. Civil society partners in Barbados, Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States, along with global health organizations, contributed examples. At the global level, our industry tracking was focused on food and beverage companies with the largest market share: Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and PepsiCo. Through social listening, GHAi expanded the search to include relevant tactics by food and beverage industry players like trade associations and front groups.

This report uses a framework to classify Big Food's influence strategies.^{16,17,18} These include industry efforts to engage with key stakeholders such as governments, to build favorable political environments; to get

involved in social causes through corporate philanthropy interventions; to lobby against healthy food policies, among others. Based on the scope of the marketing activities observed during the pandemic, GHAi also monitored advertising and promotion mechanisms. The advertising category includes misleading health information messages, cause marketing campaigns,ⁱⁱ and advertising directed to children.

Further, we aimed to identify each practice's potential to undermine food policy decisions and to negatively influence public perception about healthy eating and to affect consumer access to information. We also developed an "industry narrative analysis" by tracking COVID-19 response plans on Coca-Cola, Nestlé and PepsiCo websites. We reviewed press releases and analyzed online content on 16 websites (global and country-specific) about COVID-19 efforts. By qualitatively analyzing the messages and the companies' overall response, this narrative highlights how major global food and beverage companies positioned their brands during COVID-19 and how these global campaigns were mirrored in diverse countries and regions.

ii Cause marketing is a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative that has the dual goal of achieving business objectives and making social impact. This is typically achieved through formal partnerships between companies and non-profits, and can be mutually beneficial for both parties involved.



Background

A. Governments' Obligation to Protect the Right to Adequate Food

Access to adequate healthy food is a fundamental human right recognized by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25),¹⁹ and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11),²⁰ among other international instruments.^{21,22} According to a 2016 United Nations General Assembly report,²³ low-nutrient foods (high in sugar, fat and sodium) are not considered adequate foods, as they contribute to obesity and related diseases. Furthermore, the report calls governments and countries to develop and implement national public health strategies to address diet-related, non-communicable diseases. Such action plans can include taxes on sugary drinks and junk food, effective labeling, marketing regulations, and limits on advertising of unhealthy foods, among other measures. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, countries should also enable citizens to hold government and other actors accountable through legislative, legal or administrative measures if their right to health is violated.²⁴

B. COVID-19's Impact on Food Systems

Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic led to major disruptions in the job market, subsequent income loss, and a disruption of food supply chains.²⁵ This, in turn, impacted the public's access to fresh, healthy foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Healthy diets are associated with a better inflammatory response.^{26,27} In the near future, experts anticipate food insecurity and malnutrition,²⁸ as well as shifts toward cheaper, ultra-processed diets linked to obesity²⁹ and subsequently chronic inflammation, making it harder for the body to fight infections, including COVID-19.^{30,31,32} These factors make it critical for governments to safeguard the rights of their citizens to adequate food and to protect their populations from unhealthy food environments.



Despite their human rights obligations, governments have delayed adopting healthy food policies, causing devastating and irreversible effects on their population's health. COVID-19 has highlighted weaknesses in health systems.³³ Now more than ever, governments should prioritize the prevention of non-communicable diseases as a potential first line of defense against COVID-19 and other communicable diseases, and should also address growing rates of NCDs, which already burden health systems with increased death, disease and disability. In the long term, these actions can help alleviate this burden by reducing the high rates of diet-related illness.^{34,35}

C. How the Ultra-Processed Food Industry Interferes with Healthy Food Policies

For many years, the food and beverage industry has interfered with the design, adoption, implementation and evaluation of healthy food policies. The industry typically uses multiple tactics to influence governments, discredit science and gain public support in order to maintain their profits and expand their markets, to the detriment of public health measures.^{36,37,38} These tactics portray the companies as having a legitimate role in the policy decision-making process, putting governments at a disadvantage in their efforts to regulate the private sector and fulfill their human rights obligations, free of conflicts-of-interest and in accordance with independent evidence.

Coping with a global crisis calls for solidarity and broad support, including from the private sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many examples of collective effort have addressed emerging issues such as hunger, the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) for first responders and health relief efforts. Many truly selfless and heroic contributions have been made by citizens, governments and businesses without significant publicity.

However, the food and beverage industry has continued to aggressively promote its unhealthy products. GHA! collected multiple examples from across the globe in a critical effort to document these actions while reaffirming its position that Big Food should not benefit financially at the cost of public health, especially during a vulnerable moment such as the COVID-19 pandemic.



Key Findings

A. The Pandemic Marketing Strategy: Using a “pandemic narrative,” often deceptively, to promote food products

GHA1 gathered examples of different industry marketing and promotion tactics from both global and local levels that showed a broad negative influence on the general population’s perceptions, beliefs and consumption behaviors, especially impacting children who are more vulnerable to marketing and advertising. GHA1 found examples of these advertising tactics in Latin America, the Caribbean, China, Japan, the UK and the US.

1. Transforming a Health Crisis into a Marketing Opportunity

The industry quickly shifted its marketing strategies during the pandemic, using messages linked to nostalgia and emotions. Captive audiences unable to leave home offered an opportunity to advertise snacks and food delivery services, allowing consumers to eat at home while spending time with loved ones. Also, companies posted interactive content on social media featuring messages such as “pick your quarantine house” or “send virtual hugs” (see images 1-4).^{39,40,41,42} Products with new packaging appeared as well, sending messages of support to consumers. This casts doubt on the private sector’s frequent complaint that proposed healthy food regulations would be too challenging or costly to implement.

In China, a Mondelez representative stated that the company initially suffered a sales decline due to the pandemic, so they redirected their efforts toward encouraging people to bake with Oreos at home, with positive results.⁴³ He suggested that “Sharing a snack with your kids as everybody is sort of cooped up in the house brings back a feeling of normalcy, of togetherness, calming everybody down,”⁴⁴ and also observed that “In-home, there is more grazing, more continuous eating, and snacking takes up a much bigger role.”⁴⁵ In the midst of a health

Image 1. Skittles ad: “pick your quarantine house” in the US.



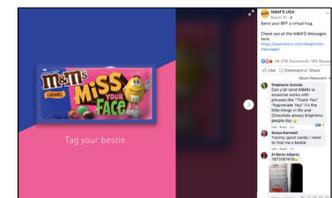
Image 2. Burger King Brazil: pick a home according to the items inside.



Image 3. McDonald’s tweeted about setting up a daily quarantine schedule, which included buying Chicken McNuggets on the McDonald’s App.



Image 4. M&Ms encouraged others to send virtual hugs.



crisis, these profit-driven claims associating unhealthy products with family moments are alarming.

In Brazil, Burger King posted a video on its Facebook account emphasizing a “Staying home” message but promoting its fast-food products’ delivery service.⁴⁶ Also, McDonald’s in Colombia posted nostalgic hints about missing fries and other cravings, suggesting consumers order through delivery apps.⁴⁷ In these ways fast-food companies facilitated eating junk food at home.

In the US, restaurant closures led to shoppers changing their consumption habits towards less healthy alternatives, including more processed, packaged, and frozen foods.⁴⁸ In another example, a PepsiCo representative revealed the company was leveraging marketing opportunities in the digital space, encouraging consumers “to have moments of enjoyment during this confinement” by snacking.⁴⁹ Major companies clearly have the resources to adapt to market shifts and influence consumers’ decisions quickly.⁵⁰

2. Marketing Directed to Children and Junk-food Promotions

Several examples of child-directed marketing of unhealthy products came to light, along with instances of massive discounts for purchasing junk food from home while in lockdown/quarantine (see image 5).

In Jamaica, fast-food chains such as Wendy’s,⁵¹ Mother’s⁵² and Juici Patties⁵³ published posts with images of children and adolescents, encouraging junk food consumption (see images 6-8). The Brazilian company Sadia posted an image on Facebook with the Sadia mascot for Mother’s Day, encouraging people to remember family recipes⁵⁴ (see image 9). Consumers, especially children, who were spending a lot more time at home in front of screens, had higher exposure to these ads and promotions.

In Brazil, Nestlé planned a live event with the title “Life Doesn’t Stop” for the release of the baby formula NAN Supreme, including an appearance by the famous singer, Maria Rita, which occurred in spite of international and local regulations that prohibit the promotion of baby formula (see image 10, page 12).^{55,56}

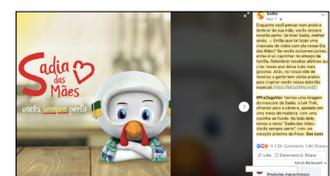
Image 5. McDonald’s discounts in Mexico.



Images 6, 7 & 8. In Jamaica, Wendy’s fast-food chain published this photo to emphasize how the company was pampering loyal customers and how Mother’s promoted free drink upgrades. Juici Patties also highlighted kids consuming their products.



Image 9. Post from the Brazilian company Sadia close to Mother’s Day.



3. Cause Marketing Campaigns

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry employed cause marketing campaigns, helping to link their unhealthy products to charitable causes. Such campaigns help consumers feel good about contributing to a social cause, even when buying unhealthy products. For example, in the US, Coca-Cola partnered with Uber Eats to support struggling restaurants by donating one meal to Feeding America for every order placed.⁵⁷ In Brazil, Burger King announced that it would donate part of the net revenue of any sandwich sold on the network to the Unified Health System, a public hospital system.⁵⁸ In Colombia, Coca-Cola created a “Solidarity Menu” to allow consumers to use a mobile app to order meals with Coke or other drinks for delivery to vulnerable communities in Bogotá (see image 11).⁵⁹ In Australia, McDonald’s began offering hand sanitizers in its new convenience menu and donating 100% of the profits to Ronald McDonald House Charities.⁶⁰

4. Misleading Messages and Deceptive Advertising

Among the multiple types of deceptive marketing, we noted examples of marketing strategies that conflated “food safety” with “healthy food.”⁶¹ In addition, some advertising highlighted products touted as good for the immune system,⁶² while others associated unhealthy foods with messages of health, comfort or support during the pandemic (see image 12).⁶³

In some instances, these messages were amplified by industry front groups. The International Life Science Institute (ILSI) positioned processed foods as safe during the pandemic, stating that these products were manufactured using measures to reduce the risk of chemical and physical contamination, and thus would preserve the health of the population.⁶⁴ Various yogurts in Colombia and Japan were promoted as a booster for the immune system in the era of COVID-19⁶⁵ (see images 13 & 14, page 13). In Jamaica, the beverage company Wisynco also promoted its Tru-Juice drink as an immunity booster, highlighting that it was freshly blended and packed with nutrients.⁶⁶ These examples from the early days of the pandemic are worrisome because they helped to generate public misperceptions about essential food, suggesting that certain ultra-processed products

Image 10. The International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) in Brazil denounced an online event organized by Nestlé that involved baby formula promotions.



Image 11. “Solidarity Menu”: an initiative from Coca-Cola in Colombia.



Image 12. Lucozade Caribbean advertised its product as a cold remedy.



should be consumed for health reasons. By promoting processed food as supposedly “safe food” that is less likely to carry infection, the industry narrative suggests that the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables could carry risks of contamination or foodborne illness. For example, the CEO of Danone stated that buying food from farmers’ markets carries some “food safety risks” that consumers accept.⁶⁷ These efforts position ultra-processed foods and drinks as essential, and safer, for household consumption, while undermining the value of natural and fresh foods.

5. Promoting Educational Resources

During the pandemic, many educational platforms aimed at helping children learn while in quarantine were funded by food and beverage industry brands. This strategy dangerously blends educational information with marketing. Viewers, especially children, cannot easily distinguish whether the educational content may be biased by corporate marketing ploys.

These corporate education programs also bestow legitimacy and position these companies as reliable sources of health-related information when they are not. In the US, an online learning platform used by schoolchildren included junk food advertising (see image 15).⁶⁸ In Jamaica, a public-private initiative launched the eHome School Network that advertised brands in classes (see image 16).⁶⁹ Such examples reinforce the need for policies that empower and protect consumers not only from advertising content but also ensure that educational spaces remain free from corporate influence.

Images 13 & 14.

In Colombia, the company Alpina promoted how its dairy drink Yox Defensis would protect consumers when they go to the supermarket or use public transport as it increases their defenses.



Image 15. In the US, Lunchables, Frosted Flakes, and McDonald’s Happy Meals advertised on ABCya’s online learning platform.



Image 16. In Jamaica, an educational program also included brand promotion.



B. How Companies Built Goodwill Publicly While Fighting Healthy Food Policies

1. Industry Lobbying

Corporate lobbying is an industry strategy widely used to sway governments, policy-makers, and critical stakeholders against public health policies. While publicly promoting a narrative centered around health and wellbeing, the industry has privately directed efforts to influence legislation and regulation in its favor and against public health. Corporations have attempted to delay healthy food policy processes and promote measures favoring corporate interests by using arguments related to the pandemic. For instance, the food and beverage industry attempted to postpone the front-of-package warning labels regulation in Mexico because of the health crisis (see **image 17**).^{70,71} In Colombia, the food and beverage industry influenced decision makers to scuttle efforts towards a tax on sugary drinks⁷² and to weaken a front-of-package warning labeling bill.⁷³ While lobbying against public health policies, PepsiCo asked the government for support to maintain production during the lockdown. Companies portrayed their products as part of the family food basket, arguing they were essential for Colombian households and should not shut down.

Similarly, companies including Nestlé, PepsiCo and Unilever called for governments to keep borders open to allow trade of food, arguing that doing so would help to address hunger issues during the pandemic. Their call to action focused on maintaining the food supply, suggesting that their products would support the most vulnerable through access to nutritious and affordable food, and would be part of sustainable and resilient food systems. Certainly maintaining the food supply through open trade and ensuring access to nutritious food is a critical goal; however, industry's narrative positioning its ultra-processed products as essential is questionable.⁷⁴

Image 17. The Mexican Council of the Consumer Products Industry requested to postpone implementation of front-of-package warning labels.



2. Questionable Food Donations

While pursuing government influence, companies donated food and other items to needy communities, frontline workers, food banks, and small businesses, among others. A particularly problematic intervention was the donation of junk food and sugary drinks to vulnerable populations and government relief programs. Most countries do not have donation protocols or restrictions on donations of harmful or unhealthy products. Growing food insecurity rates will only generate more opportunities for food donations, so governments should consider adopting donation protocols.

In Colombia, Nestlé made multiple donations, including ultra-processed products.⁷⁵ At the same time, the food and beverage industry continued to push the narrative that these products were essential for households, while emphasizing these donations as a solution for hunger (see images 18⁷⁶ & 19⁷⁷) without addressing their role in the obesity epidemic. In South Africa, Coca-Cola collaborated with a non-profit organization, Gauteng Young Vision, to donate 532 “cooldrinks” (soft drinks) to vulnerable families located in townships of Thembisa and Daveyton, as well as to multiple healthcare centers such as the Obesity Care Centre⁷⁸ (see image 20). There is considerable irony in the latter detail. In Brazil, companies such as Bauducco, Danone and Nestlé donated more than 400 tons of ultra-processed foods, identified by the Brazilian government’s dietary guidelines as foods to avoid.⁷⁹ In India, KFC pledged to donate one million meals to communities in need.⁸⁰ In the Philippines, Nestlé donated kits with Nescafé, Milo, Bear Brand Fortified, Koko Krunch, Chuckie and Maggi products to one million families nationwide.⁸¹ Many of these products are high in sugar and salt. Grupo Bimbo, a Mexican bread company, committed more than \$200 million pesos (USD \$8.7 million) to support COVID-19 relief efforts, including the provision of lunchboxes to healthcare staff, in partnership with the IMSS Foundation and the Mexican Foundation for Health.⁸²

Furthermore, donations of baby formula, a practice that is outlawed according to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, were also identified, directly affecting early childhood nutrition by discouraging breastfeeding and turning the pandemic into an opportunity to generate new consumers. In addition, infant

Image 18. General Mills produced \$5 million worth of products to be donated to Feeding America, which runs a network of 200 food banks.



Image 19. In Colombia, Grupo Nutresa reported that the country’s Food Bank Association would distribute 200,000 packages for vulnerable families on its behalf.



Image 20. Coca-Cola donation of soft drinks in South Africa.



formula companies exploited the pandemic to position themselves as public health experts and to promote their products as safe breast-milk substitutes through social media.⁸³

Food donations were either direct to communities, as was the case with Postobón in Colombia,⁸⁴ or through partnerships with health, human rights, hunger or children’s organizations, including: The Red Cross^{85,86,87,88} and Red Crescent Societies,⁸⁹ Save the Children,⁹⁰ Feeding America,⁹¹ the UN World Food Program,⁹² and the National Urban League among others.⁹³ Many of these donations targeted vulnerable communities, including low-income people or children and adolescents. Donations were also directed to healthcare workers who had high exposure to COVID-19 in their workplaces (see images 21-23).

The PepsiCo Foundation announced “United for Latin America,” which was described as the most extensive emergency aid strategy in history for Latin America. This campaign included a donation of USD \$6.5 million to finance food for more than 70,000 children in 12 countries.⁹⁴ The company joined local NGOs such as The Global Food Banking Network, Save the Children, and Un Kilo de Ayuda to help distribute food. In Colombia, this initiative went forward through the Food Bank Association of Colombia (ABACO), which served as an intermediary between the government and PepsiCo. The company also replicated this effort in other regions such as the “United for South Africa” initiative (see images 24 & 25).⁹⁵

Of the examples collected by GHAI for this report, 27 disclosed the details of their donation, which totaled USD \$19 million, 528 tons of food and 34 million meals. Most companies did not specify which products were donated, and most sugary drink companies only indicated that they were donating water and “other drinks.” That being said, photos in media stories and on social media clearly show that the donations included sugary drinks and other junk food (see images 26 & 27, page 17).⁹⁶

To foster public acceptance and support of such contributions, a two-minute primetime segment called “Solidariedade S.A.” was produced by the media and began running during primetime news programs in Brazil. It highlighted corporate donations and positive news from the private sector during the pandemic.^{97,98} This is another example of how

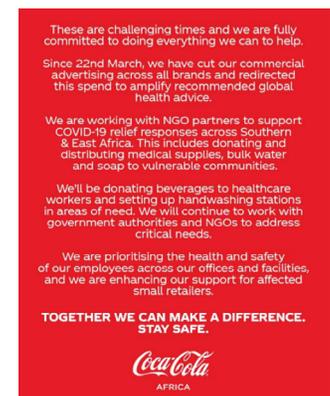
Image 21. In Jamaica, KFC donated J\$10 million and 5,000 meals to fight COVID-19.



Image 22. Chefette, a fast-food restaurant chain in Barbados donated meals to frontline workers.



Image 23. Coca-Cola Africa statement on different CSR actions including donation of “beverages” to healthcare workers.



Images 24 & 25. Regional PepsiCo initiatives, including partnerships with civil society organizations.



the industry positioned itself as a collaborative and necessary player in the economic, social and health context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the food and beverage industry continued to position its products as primary household needs for children and low-income people and patients, governments largely failed to challenge this message.

3. Building Goodwill with Government

GHA! collected examples of direct partnerships between industry and the public sector in Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, and the US. These also included regional efforts and monetary donations that supported government-led responses in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America.

Multinational and national food and beverage companies in some of these countries actively partnered with Ministries of Health, Education, or Labor, municipalities, and other public authorities to support relief efforts. These partnerships, which spanned the globe, included cash or in-kind donations of sugary drinks, bottled water, medical equipment and supplies. In Barbados, a fast food chain, Chefette, donated BBD \$100,000 (USD \$50,000) to a government program that assists vulnerable families affected by COVID-19.⁹⁹ In Jamaica, PepsiCo donated JD \$15 million (USD \$100,000) to the Ministry of Health and Wellness, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and others.¹⁰⁰ McDonald's donated approximately USD \$60,000 (see image 28) to the Ministry of Health's Fund for personal protection equipment for COVID-19 front line workers in Malaysia.¹⁰¹ In Colombia, the city of Bogotá pledged to deliver 10,000 breakfast meals to the most vulnerable families, with the support of Milo, a Nestlé brand (see image 29).¹⁰² PepsiCo pledged to support government-led responses to the pandemic, aimed at vulnerable populations in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, and the PepsiCo Millions of Meals program joined Pakistan's Ehsaas government ration program to deliver millions of meals to those affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁰³

Image 26. In Curaçao, Coke donated beverages, including soft drinks, to different medical institutions and civil society organizations during the health emergency.



Image 27. In Curaçao, donations of ultra-processed products mixed with fresh foods and other essentials.



Image 28. In Malaysia McDonald's posed for PR photo to promote RM 250,000 (approx. USD 60,000) donation to the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Fund to provide personal protection equipment for COVID-19 frontline workers.



Image 29. The Milo Brand from Nestlé supported the municipality of Bogotá in Colombia.



While there is no doubt that these donations, especially those of medical supplies, were greatly needed, these corporate social responsibility interventions enabled companies to improve their image and strengthen their brands. It also helped them build alliances with decision-makers and position their companies as crucial government allies. This was evident when government authorities in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, publicly recognized the industry through social media and thanked them for their support.^{104,105,106}

During the pandemic, many public-private initiatives emerged that illustrated novel industry tactics. The urgent need to make COVID-19 preventive measures and recommendations widely available was a unique opportunity for companies to use their far-reaching platforms and resources to serve the public health. For instance, through an initiative with Ministries of Health and Presidential offices, Coca-Cola offered its social media spaces to communicate time-sensitive COVID-19 information.¹⁰⁷ Government health authorities' logos stood alongside the famous Coca-Cola red logo, reaching 24 million people in Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama (see images 30-33).¹⁰⁸

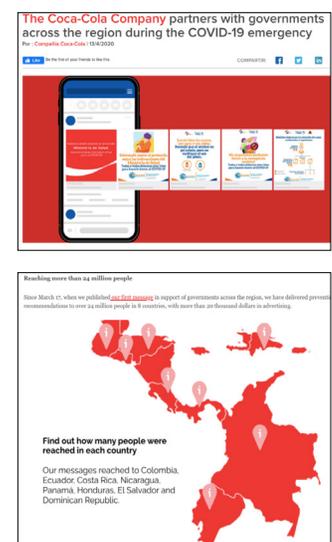
In the US, Pepsi set up COVID-19 testing sites in direct collaboration with governments or health authorities (see images 34-35, page 19).^{109,110} These practices positioned them and their brands as public health partners during a health emergency. Global sugary drinks brands that contribute to NCDs, including diabetes, were sharing messages under health or government authorities' logos, appearing to gain regulatory and political influence. These public-private initiatives are examples of corporate capture of government, where the industry assumes governments' obligations and allows conflicts-of-interest from the private sector to interfere in governmental decision-making.

Moreover, as many children stopped attending school due to the lockdown, companies actively supported school feeding programs or government donation campaigns. For instance, the Ministry of Education of Jamaica reached agreements with the fast-food chain operators of Burger King, KFC, Little Caesars and Popeyes to provide meals to students on the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH).¹¹¹ Companies including Coca-Cola partnered

Images 30 & 31. Coca-Cola's tweets shared time-sensitive Covid-related government messages in Latin America.



Images 32 & 33. Coca-Cola's website highlighted its alliance with governments across the region.



with governments and industry associations in Latin America to launch campaigns helping small grocers and shopkeepers to operate safely during the pandemic. These new alliances broadened their legitimate space (see image 36). Many of these collaborative efforts were presented through formal signing ceremonies between governments and companies, allowing the private sector to show their “good deeds” to the press (see images 37 & 38).^{112,113,114} This provided the companies with lots of publicity and reinforced the specter of corporate capture.

Images 34 & 35. COVID-19 testing center sponsored by Pepsi in the US.



Image 36. Companies and industry linked institutions supported small grocers in Colombia.



Image 37. Wisynco Jamaica announced a donation of 5,000 600ml BIGGA drinks to government feeding program.



Image 38. PepsiCo partnered with the Government of Pakistan.



The Industry Narrative: Showing Compassion and Stepping Up As Part of the Solution

The ultra-processed food and beverage industry developed a powerful narrative to divert attention away from diet and public health-related issues. This tried-and-true corporate tactic was especially potent during a pandemic. To reach their employees, consumers, and society in general, the industry narrative focused on their 'good traits.' Their CSR mentioned earlier in this report bolstered the narrative about the critical role they were playing in the crisis.

The first peak of the pandemic also came at a critical time for brands that were facing heavy scrutiny by consumers. The Edelman Brand Trust Survey¹¹⁵ released in May 2020 exposed some vulnerabilities for brands, including the food and beverage industry. Among people surveyed, only 38 percent believed that business was putting people before profits, and many did not believe that companies were protecting their employees (61 percent) or helping small suppliers and business customers (62 percent).¹¹⁶ At the same time, consumers indicated that businesses needed to focus on solutions, not selling their products. In an Ipsos North America survey, 86 percent felt it was critical for brands, including food and beverage companies, to demonstrate empathy.¹¹⁷ The food and beverage industry leveraged the moment to reinforce a powerful narrative showing its selflessness. It highlighted its proactive measures, claiming to be part of the solution through vibrant partnerships and empathy for employees and suppliers. To do this, the industry has invested in the community and public health, an effective strategy in the pandemic since consumers are seeking support and optimism.

Image 39. Coca-Cola South Africa posted on Instagram a video on how to wear a mask to prevent COVID-19.



Images 40 & 41. McDonald's and Coke changed their logos to depict that they supported social distancing.



The industry also positioned its products as being essential to households for adequate nutrition, with an emphasis on sustainable food production and some discussions of food systems, stressing the wellbeing of consumers and employees as priorities. They encouraged customers to follow COVID-19 preventive measures and social distancing recommendations through campaigns with emotional messages that positioned their brands as responsible and supportive (see images 39-41, page 20 and 42-43).^{118,119}

The industry reinforced this narrative through hashtags such as #HereForYou,¹²⁰ #PromotingOptimism,¹²¹ #TogetherAtHome and iconic phrases such as “por todos” (for all/everyone),¹²² “It’s About People,” “The great meal,”¹²³ along with messages of positivity and words of recognition and support to those fighting COVID-19 on the frontline. Through these tactics, industry worked to influence the general population’s perceptions and increase brand loyalty.

Image 42. McDonald’s Brazil online video showed kids asking their parents to go to McDonald’s during the quarantine. The video had a message on “safety,” encouraging customers to buy through the “drive-thru” as there is no contact with employees.

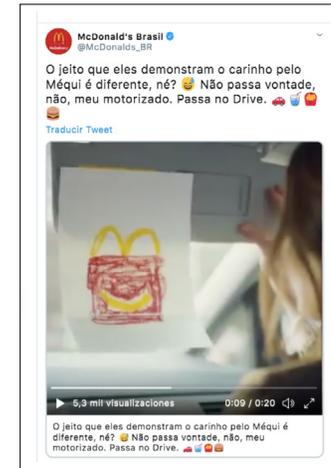


Image 43. FEMSA Mexico stated: “Our gratitude to all the institutions that allow us to be part of the solution”.



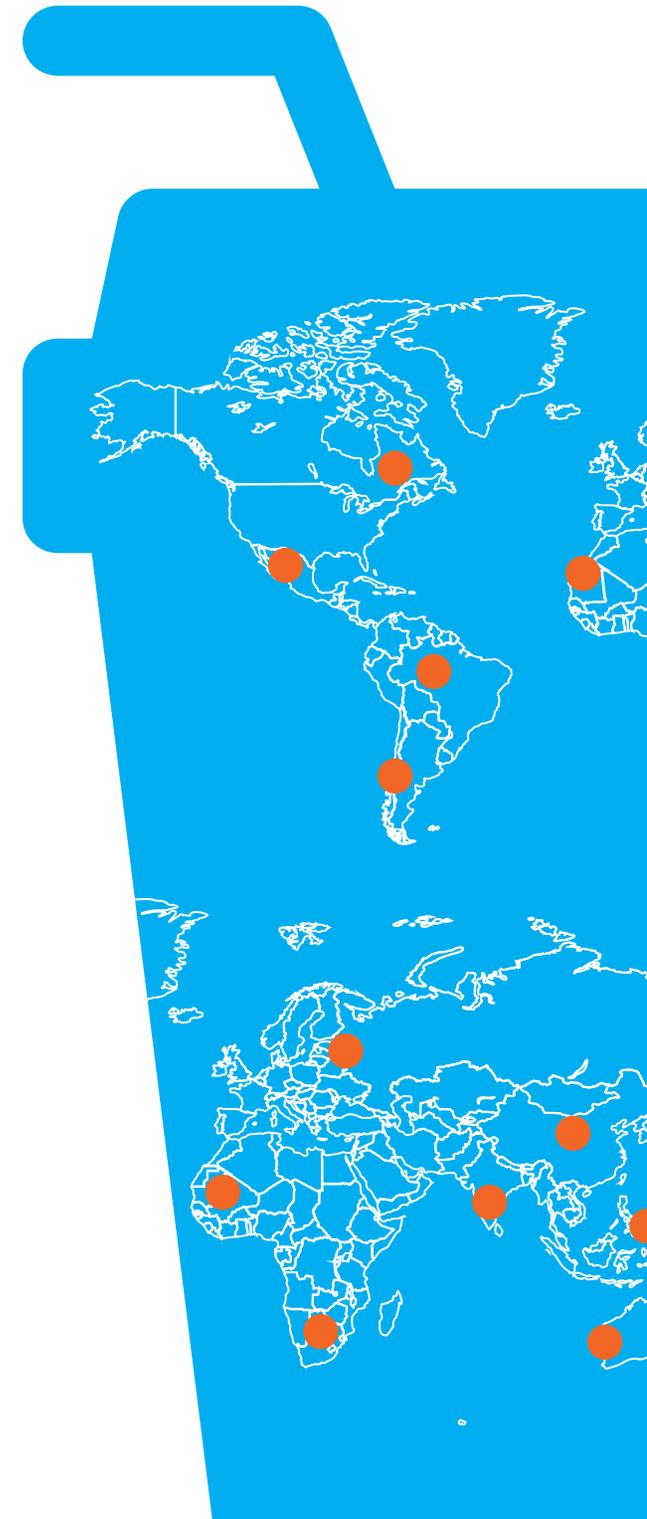
Implications and Necessary Actions

The industry sought creative ways to market its products and brands to consumers within the context of the pandemic and to position itself as a safe way forward in the face of hunger and fear of illness.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented need for global unification and action, particularly to support populations in vulnerable conditions. The food and beverage industry quickly and aggressively mobilized to support relief efforts and to promote and donate its products. Within our relatively small sample size, this report has identified industry donations totaling over USD \$19 million and 34 million meals, which is undoubtedly only a fraction of the global picture.

Public health advocates and experts around the world are rightfully concerned by the sheer size and scope of the food and beverage industry's range of actions during the pandemic. The issue is not that the private sector played a role in helping communities, governments and organizations during a major health and economic crisis. Indeed, it's commendable to see the humanitarian contributions of those who stepped up to provide funds, operational support, and healthy food to those in need. However, some ongoing industry actions indirectly influence decision-making environments and interfere in public policies intended to protect the public health. In addition, these companies have worked behind the scenes to block food policies, including using COVID-19 as a pretext to delay the implementation of a new front-of-package warning label law in México.

While some industry efforts may have been borne out of altruism, this report and others from academia and global health organizations underscore these actions' potential to worsen the obesity and diet-related epidemic. The industry sought creative ways to market its products and brands to consumers within the context of the pandemic and to position itself as a safe way forward in the face of hunger and fear of illness. These aggressive marketing tactics negatively influenced consumer diets and drove some consumers to eat more ultra-processed food.¹²⁴ The food and beverage industry paired their CSR activities with large public relations and marketing campaigns to ensure that consumers knew about these good deeds. These "nutri-washing" efforts presented a clean self-image and distracted consumers from the links between their unhealthy products and



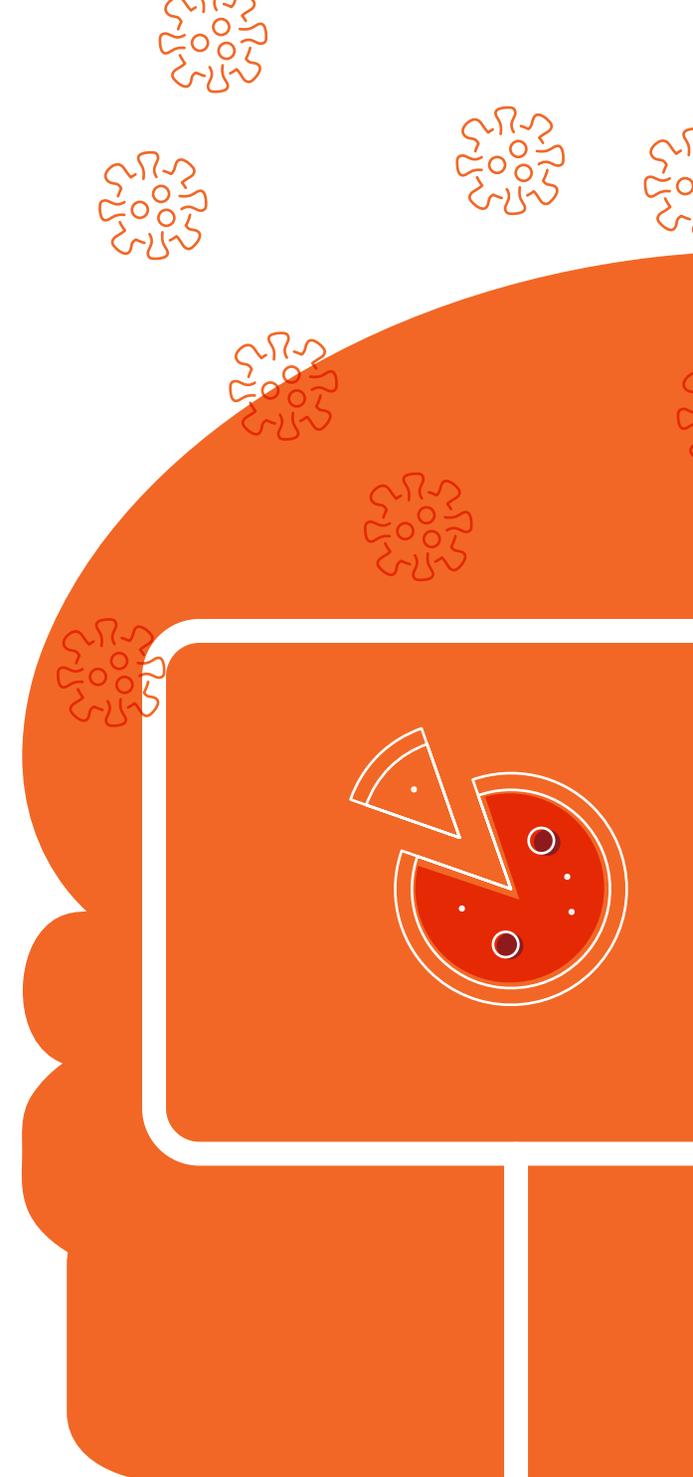
obesity, chronic diseases and death. Most notably, companies deployed manipulative marketing tactics, including deceptive child-directed marketing, taking advantage of the lack of marketing regulations on unhealthy food and drinks in most countries around the world. The need for accessible and trusted information about what is healthy or not has never been greater. Regulations can help governments, companies, humanitarian organizations and consumers to more easily understand what is healthy or not.

A. Implications of Corporate Marketing Strategies and Behaviors

As a result, food and beverage companies appeared to be part of the solution to the current crisis, and a true partner to government's health policy decisions.

By portraying themselves as a key partner to government, companies were able to favorably shape their image in the public eye. Allowing Big Food brands to share official government social media platforms for public health messages helped position these companies as authorities. As these brands stood side-by-side with Ministries of Health, and as government officials publicly thanked these companies for their help, the public came to see the food and beverage industry as a legitimate authority on what consumers could do to protect themselves from COVID-19. Assisting governments with financial or in-kind resources, food and beverage companies also affected public perceptions of their legitimacy at the policy-making table, allowing corporate interests to have a say.

As a result, food and beverage companies appeared to be part of the solution to the current crisis, and a true partner to government's health policy decisions. This is a clear case of conflict-of-interest and has led to private influence trumping evidence in policy decisions. Not that the industry should not be heard and consulted on implementation processes and deadlines as a legal and social actor; they simply should not be defining public health policies. The practices highlighted in this report also undermine the role of the government and can lead to "corporate capture" where parties with vested interest in their bottom line gain undue influence, shaping public health policies while further legitimizing the industry's role.



Decision-making processes must be transparent and free of conflicts-of-interest. The food and beverage industry should not be allowed undue influence in the policy-making process.

B. Balancing Solutions – Shaping policies that prioritize public interests

Despite recommendations by the WHO and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), many countries have not adopted comprehensive food policy measures that address the current obesity and diet-related disease epidemics. Governments must fulfill their human rights obligations to guarantee the right to healthy and adequate food, including through judicious regulation of the private sector. In response to deceptive marketing practices, governments can protect all consumers, but especially children and adolescents, from industry manipulation practices. But without mandatory regulations, the ultra-processed food and beverage corporations have demonstrated willful disregard for human rights standards, despite self-regulatory and voluntary schemes.^{125,126,127} The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health recently issued a statement that echoes the urgent need for global action to encourage governments to adopt healthy food policies for all. Notably, the statement also highlights the need to regulate the food and beverage industry to ensure that companies convey accurate information about their products to consumers.¹²⁸

Healthy food and nutrition policy solutions can be crafted to address diet-related disease epidemics. But additional policies may be needed to allow such solutions to become a reality. Decision-making processes must be transparent and free of conflicts-of-interest. The food and beverage industry should not be allowed undue influence in the policy-making process.



Necessary Actions

By governments:

- Regulate food assistance programs for vulnerable populations, including food donations during health crises, to provide healthy and nutritious food and avoid worsening existing health conditions.
- Incorporate the human right to adequate food into policy-making, especially the right of access to food that nourishes rather than fills one with unhealthy calories.
- Implement evidence-based healthy food policies to address current and future diet-related disease epidemics:
 - *Front-of-package labels warning of high content of sugar, fats and sodium;*
 - *School food environments free of junk food and sugary drink offerings and promotions;*
 - *Comprehensive bans of advertising, promotion and sponsorship of unhealthy foods and drinks, particularly those aimed at children and adolescents; and*
 - *Taxes on junk food and sugary drinks.*
- Adopt legal frameworks to curb industry interference when conflicts-of-interest could negatively affect health policies.

By civil society:

- Monitor and expose Big Food's interference in the healthy food policymaking process and monitor progress and impact of public health policies and the protection of the right to adequate food.
- Advocate for the healthy food policy solutions recommended for governments to implement.
- Demand that governments be transparent in their relations with the private sector and promote regulations to prevent conflict-of-interest.
- Continue to raise awareness of the role that the food and beverage industry has played in rising global rates of obesity, diet-related NCDs, and mortality.



Conclusion

Now more than ever, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for evidence-based policies and regulations to promote healthy environments and to protect the right to adequate food, particularly for vulnerable populations like children. Without such regulations, the ultra-processed food and beverage industry has free rein to develop aggressive marketing strategies for its unhealthy products and to take advantage of the pandemic to promote their business at the expense of public health.

As a global community, we must develop the social and political will to adopt healthy food policies to improve the health of present and future generations, and we must prioritize public health above private interests and profits.



Snapshot of Some Examples from Across the Globe

**Questionable
Food Donations**

**Marketing
Directed to
Children**

**Misleading
Messages and
Deceptive
Advertising**

**Cause Marketing
Campaigns**

**Industry
Lobbying**



These maps provide a snapshot of some examples from across the globe.

Questionable Food Donations

Marketing Directed to Children

Misleading Messages and Deceptive Advertising

Cause Marketing Campaigns

Industry Lobbying

Instructions: navigate within the descriptions on the map and click on the highlighted [links](#) to explore some more examples.



United States: McDonald's donated 10 million "Thank you Meals" to frontline workers. [link](#)



Jamaica: LASCO Group donated nearly \$2m (approx. USD 14,000) in products, including various ultra-processed products to communities through different initiatives. [link](#) [link](#)



Philippines: Nestlé donated Kits with *Nescafé, Milo, Bear Brand Fortified, Koko Krunch, Chuckie, and Maggi* to 1 million families and frontline workers. [link](#)

Nestlé PH mounts P500-M 'Kasambuhay' program for 1-M families, frontliners, its people as COVID-19 rages



Todos ellos han donado a #BogotáSolidariaEnCasa



Colombia: PepsiCo donated 27,000 products to families in need in Bogotá for the "Solidarity at home" program. **Nestlé** donated 25,000 product baskets to be distributed among vulnerable communities (53% of all the products donated were UPP). [link](#) [link](#) [link](#)



South Africa: McDonald's partnered with the organization SA Harvest to provide a 60,000 burgers donation to communities in need. [link](#)



These maps provide a snapshot of some examples from across the globe.



Jamaica: Private sector organizations (including food and beverage industry) provided an e-platform for students that was used for brand promotion in partnership with the Department of Education. [link](#) ([image 16 in the report](#))

Questionable Food Donations

Marketing Directed to Children

Misleading Messages and Deceptive Advertising

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Instructions: navigate within the descriptions on the map and click on the highlighted [links](#) to explore some more examples.



Barbados: Fast-food chain **Chefette** promoted kids menus including toys, to buy online and consume at home, directing content to children and adolescents. [link](#)



Brazil: McDonald's encouraged kids to ask their parents to go to McDonald's during the quarantine. The video highlights the safety of customers using the "drive-thru" as with no employee contact. ([image 42 in the report](#))



These maps provide a snapshot of some examples from across the globe.

Questionable Food Donations

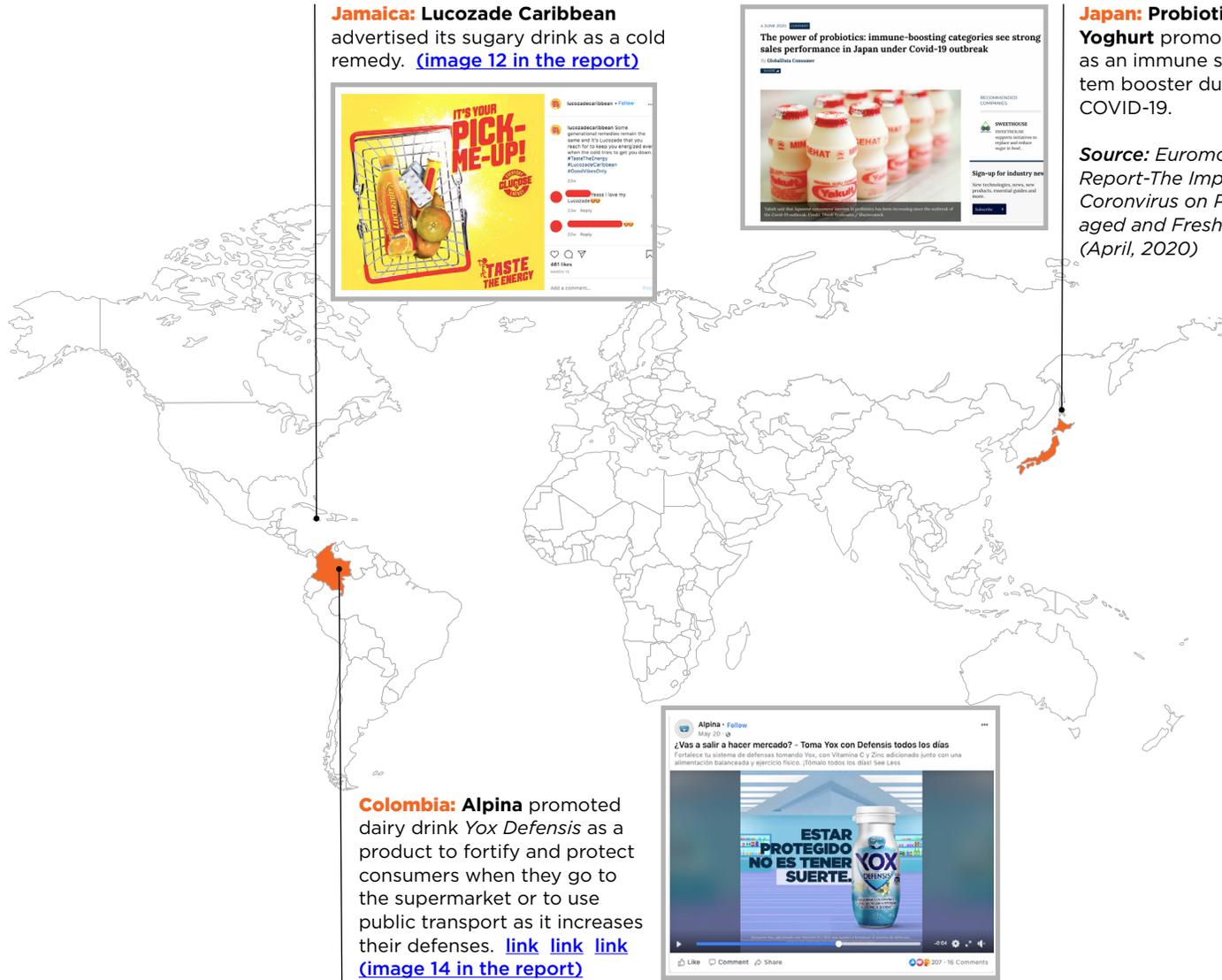
Marketing Directed to Children

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Questionable Food Donations

Marketing Directed to Children

Misleading Messages and Deceptive Advertising

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Industry Lobbying

Instructions: navigate within the descriptions on the map and click on the highlighted [links](#) to explore some more examples.



Mexico: Nestlé partnered with FEMSA and YZA Pharmacy to donate baby formula to vulnerable communities for every baby formula or toddler milk purchased, promoting breast milk alternatives during an emergency. [link](#)



Japan: Coca-Cola encouraged people to exercise at home while in quarantine through online exercise videos, pledging to donate up to 1 million drinks to app users who complete 1,000 steps per day. [link](#)



Brazil: Burger King announced it would donate proceeds for any sandwich sold nationwide to support covid-19 relief efforts. [link](#)



Australia: McDonald's offered hand sanitizers on its new convenience menu, with all profits benefitting Ronald McDonald House Charities. [link](#)

These maps provide a snapshot of some examples from across the globe.

Questionable Food Donations

Marketing Directed to Children

Misleading Messages and Deceptive Advertising

Cause Marketing Campaigns

Industry Lobbying

Instructions: navigate within the descriptions on the map and click on the highlighted [links](#) to explore some more examples.

Mexico: The UPP industry in Mexico attempted to postpone FOPL regulation by using the pandemic as a lobbying argument to decision makers. [link](#) [link](#)

México: compañías usan la pandemia para pedir prórroga al etiquetado de alimentos
 La obesidad causa 200 mil muertes al año por enfermedades relacionadas en este país. A pesar de las recomendaciones sanitarias globales el gobierno de López Obrador no ha impulsado medidas firmes de alimentos saludables. Lo contrario, en este contexto, han incluido entre sus medidas para enfrentar la pandemia, la prórroga de tres años de la norma que obliga a etiquetar los alimentos. Una colaboración del Laboratorio de Percepción y Opinión de México.
 Por Verónica Espinosa
 SIGANOS EN [Twitter, Facebook, YouTube icons]
 OJOPUBLICO
 SUSCRIBASE Suscríbete a nuestro newsletter para estar al día con las últimas noticias

Katherine Miranda @MirandaBogota · 2 jun.
 En plena pandemia, con una clara relación de las muertes por COVID-19 con la obesidad y la diabetes, Comisión III vota en contra del impuesto a las bebidas azucaradas y alimentos procesados.
 0:07 54.3 mil visualizaciones
 175 1,1 mil 2,3 mil

Se hunde propuesta sobre impuestos a las bebidas azucaradas y alimentos procesados.
 TOPICS: Bebidas Azucaradas Cámara De Representantes Impuestos Juan Pablo Celis Katherine Miranda
 Fotografía tomada de: panyplaza.com
 POSTED BY: CUARTO DE HORA 5 JUNIO 2020

Colombia: Arguing its products are an essential household item, **PepsiCo** approached the government to request their continued production. The UPP industry also lobbied Congress to block a sugary drinks tax and to weaken a front of package label bill. [link](#) [link](#) [link](#)



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