

Food industry needs more scrutiny from the public health community

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In an editorial to launch a major new series on "Big Food," the *PLoS Medicine* editors and guest editors argue that the multinational food and beverage industry has a growing influence on the global health agenda and a major role in the obesity crisis, but that its activities have not been met with sufficient scrutiny or skepticism.

The [PLoS Medicine](#) editors say that "Food, unlike tobacco and drugs, is necessary to live and is central to health and disease. And yet the big multinational food companies control what people everywhere eat, resulting in a stark and sick irony: one billion people on the planet are hungry while two billion are obese or overweight."

Furthermore, large food and beverage companies have an influential presence on the global health stage, presenting at major conferences and United Nations meetings, rebranding themselves as "nutrition companies," and offering themselves as experts not just in food production but in malnutrition, obesity, and even poverty. And yet food companies' primary obligation is to drive profit by selling food, say the editors: "Why does the [global health](#) community find this acceptable and how do these [conflicts of interest](#) play out?" Over three weeks the series aims to examine these questions and raise a debate on the role of the food industry in the health arena.

In an accompanying Essay, the guest editors of the *PLoS Medicine* series on Big Food, Marion Nestle from New York University and David Stuckler from Cambridge University, describe the public health response

so far to Big Food as a "failure to act." They argue that "Public health professionals must recognize that Big Food's influence on global food systems is a problem, and do what is needed to reach a consensus about how to engage critically... [they] must place as high a priority on nutrition as they do on HIV, infectious diseases, and other disease threats."

The guest editors continue: "They should support initiatives such as restrictions on marketing to children, better nutrition standards for school meals, and taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages. The central aim of public health must be to bring into alignment Big Food's profit motives with [public health](#) goals. Without taking direct and concerted action to expose and regulate the vested interests of Big [Food](#), epidemics of poverty, hunger, and obesity are likely to become more acute."

More information: The PLoS Medicine Editors (2012) PLoS Medicine Series on Big Food: The Food Industry Is Ripe for Scrutiny. PLoS Med 9(6): e1001246. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001246](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001246)

Stuckler D, Nestle M (2012) Big Food, Food Systems, and Global Health. PLoS Med 9(6): e1001242. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001242](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001242)

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