

Harmful effects of ultra-processed food and drink industries should be regulated

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An international analysis of food, drink, and alcohol industry involvement in NCD policies shows that despite the common reliance on industry self-regulation and public-private partnerships to improve public health, there is no evidence to support either their effectiveness or safety. On the contrary, the study, led by Professor Rob Moodie from the University of Melbourne in Australia, found startling evidence that these "unhealthy commodity" industries use similar strategies to the tobacco industry to undermine public health policies and programmes.

The paper makes a series of hard-hitting and evidence-based recommendations for governments, [public health](#) professionals, and society on the involvement of these industries, starting with the proposal that they should have no role in the formation of national or international policy on NCDs.

The researchers were unable to find any [health benefit](#) to industry involvement in voluntary regulation or public-private partnerships, which has long been suspected, but not confirmed by this kind of research until now.

Industry documents reveal how these industries shape public-health legislation and avoid regulation. This is done through actions such as "building financial and institutional relations" with health professionals, non-governmental organisations, and national and international health agencies; distorting research findings; and lobbying politicians to oppose [health care reform](#).

According to the authors, "regulation, or the threat of regulation, is the only way to change these transnational corporations; therefore the audience for public health is government and not industry."

Public regulation would be the most effective way to change behaviour, say the authors. This approach focuses on directly pressuring industry by raising awareness of their shady practices and maintaining active public pressure—an approach that has worked in changing the behaviour of the tobacco industry.

Through the sale and [aggressive marketing](#) of tobacco, alcohol, and ultra-processed food and drink, multinational corporations are now major drivers of the world's growing epidemics of NCDs.

Worryingly, say the authors, this may only be the tip of the iceberg: "Saturation of markets in high-income countries has caused the industries to rapidly penetrate emerging global markets, as the [tobacco industry](#) has done. Almost all growth in the foreseeable future in profits and sales of these unhealthy commodities will be in low-income and middle-income countries [where consumption is currently low]."

The study concludes that the failure of industry to regulate itself and the lack of evidence that partnerships with industry can deliver health benefits, should be a renewed wake-up call to governments, the public health community, and civil society to step in and regulate the harmful activities of these industries, rather than collaborate with them.

More information: www.thelancet.com/series/non-communicable-diseases

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