

Industry 'leveraging pandemic' to peddle unhealthy products: NGOs

September 10 2020, by Patrick Galey



So-called NCDs (Non-Communicable Diseases) such as diabetes, hypertension and lung disease are the world's biggest killers, leading to 40 million deaths every year

Food and drink producers are leveraging the coronavirus pandemic to

push unhealthy products such as alcohol, sugar-laden soft drinks and fatty fast food on consumers, an international coalition of health charities said Thursday.

Crowd-sourced research conducted by the Non-Communicable Disease Alliance raised concerns that food giants are fuelling increases in chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease—themselves known Covid-19 risk factors.

Hundreds of examples reported from more than 90 countries included beer companies adapting their logos to suggest improved health, burger companies geo-tracking customers with the promise of free food, and soft drink giants donating cans to struggling communities.

Authors of the report, compiled jointly with the University of Edinburgh, accused food and drink behemoths of knowingly exacerbating the impact of Covid-19 on high-risk constituents, including [obese individuals](#) and smokers.

Lucy Westerman, police and campaigns manager with the NCD Alliance, said the survey had thrown up two clear trends.

"The growing epidemiological evidence that people living with NCDs are suffering worse outcomes from Covid-19, and that many producers of unhealthy commodities have rapidly adapted their strategies in an attempt to capitalise on the pandemic and lockdowns," she said.

So-called NCDs such as diabetes, hypertension and lung disease are the world's biggest killers, leading to 40 million deaths every year. More than two billion people are overweight or obese, which carries a higher risk of a host of health complications.

Of more than 750 examples submitted by contributors of what the NCD

Alliance called "corporate capture" by food and drink companies, the most were reported in Britain and the United States.

But there were also numerous signs of the alleged influence of corporate lobbying pushing [policy-makers](#) to keep the sale of alcohol, tobacco and [fast food](#) even during near-total lockdowns.

In Bangladesh for example, the ministry of industry declared tobacco an essential commodity. Likewise, the government in Kenya included tobacco, alcohol and processed [food](#) and beverages in its official lists of essential items.

While countries such as South Africa and Thailand did initially ban the sale of alcohol during lockdown, the researchers reported that both governments relented to industry pressure and repealed the restrictions far sooner than planned.

Katie Dain, CEO of the NCD Alliance, called for tighter regulation on how companies market unhealthy products.

"We see that companies are deploying these tactics... in order to ingratiate themselves with policy-makers while barely concealing cynical attempts to weaken current rules and head off future policies," she said.

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