

The Role of Private Sector in Promoting Public Health Nutrition

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Abstract

The promotion of health in terms of prevention and control of malnutrition and chronic noncommunicable diseases (CNCD) is critical not only to avoiding the direct negative consequences on the quality of life of individuals, but also to prevent adverse effects on the countries' healthcare and economic systems. The World Health Organization (WHO) states in different reports that the private sector is a relevant player in promoting healthy eating and regular physical activity and can act as a responsible entrepreneur in the implementation of measures aimed at sending positive and coherent messages. Although there is still much to be done, there is evidence of the commitment of the largest food industries in Brazil to corporate social responsibility, including engagement in health promotion and improvement of the quality of life of employees, their families, the local community and society as a whole. It is also possible to observe that most of these industries are committed to the promotion of children's health, mainly through nutritional education actions and the development of products with a healthier nutritional profile. This article aims to describe some of these initiatives, based on WHO best bets.

Keywords: Private Sector; Promotion of Health; Chronic Noncommunicable Diseases (CNCD)

It is estimated that the world population will reach the mark of 9 billion people by 2050. Simultaneously, average life expectancy has been increasing gradually since 1950, currently reaching 57 years in Africa, 70 years in Latin America, 79 years in North America, and 80 years in Europe [1]. The promotion of a healthy lifelong lifestyle, with a clear emphasis on the key role of nutrition and essential micronutrients to reduce the risk of chronic diseases and hidden hunger, may prevent or delay the onset of different pathologies [2].

The maintenance of a healthy life begins at the 1,000-day window and goes on to the senior age, with special attention to different risk groups [3]. Nevertheless, countries and individuals are faced with malnutrition, which may emerge from ingestion of insufficient quantities of essential nutrients, while there is excess food consumption in relation to the level of energy expenditure [4].

A number of studies make evident that the multiple burden of malnutrition is the "new normal." According to The Global Nutrition Report 2014, published in The Journal of Nutrition, in March 2015, an evaluation of data from 122 countries regarding (a) dwarfism below 5 years, (b) anemia in women of reproductive age, and (c) overweight adults, showed that most countries (64%) had a prevalence of two conditions evaluated, while 20% showed the three conditions studied [4].

The promotion of health in terms of prevention and control of malnutrition and chronic noncommunicable diseases (CNCD) is crucial not only to avoid the direct negative consequences to the quality of life of individuals, but also to prevent the unfavorable effects in the nations' healthcare and economic systems.

An analysis carried out by the World Economic Forum estimates that countries such as Brazil, China, India and Russia lose over 20 million productive years of life annually due to CNCD, and the socioeconomic impact affects the progress of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, covering issues such as health and social determinants (education and poverty) [5].

In the case of Brazil, specifically, the analyses suggest that each 10% increase in the prevalence of CNCD is associated with a 0.5% reduction in annual economic growth indices. Estimates indicate that the loss of labor productivity and the decrease in family income resulting from three CNCDs alone (diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and stroke) would lead to a loss in the Brazilian economy of \$4.18 billion between 2006 and 2015 [6].

Thus, the different entities acting in the evaluation, planning and responsibility of actions aimed at accelerating global progress in nutrition – including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and the World Bank (WBG) – identify distinct areas of short- and long-term opportunities, which require intersectoral collaboration between governments, civil organizations, and the private sector [4].

Additionally, the WHO states in different reports that the private sector is a relevant player in promoting healthy eating and regular physical activity and can act as a responsible entrepreneur in the implementation of measures aimed at sending positive and coherent messages. Considering that many companies operate worldwide, international collaboration can also be decisive.

Private accountability is even more evident when taking into account the list of interventions that the WHO [7] considers to be the “best bets” i.e. those that must be implemented immediately in order to produce accelerated outcomes in terms of lives saved, diseases prevented, and high costs avoided. They are: reducing salt intake and salt content in food; replacing trans fats in foods with polyunsaturated fats; promoting public enlightenment on food and physical activity, including through the mass media; and restricting the marketing of foods and beverages with high salt, fat and sugar content, especially for children.

These interventions are quite similar to those presented in the Global Strategy for the Promotion of Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Health [8], in which the food industry was asked to commit to the following actions: (a) promoting healthy eating and physical activity in accordance with national guidelines, international standards, and the general objectives of the global strategy; (b) limiting, in existing products, the contents of saturated fats and trans fatty acids, free sugars, and salt; (c) continuing to develop and offer consumers affordable, healthy and nutritious options; (d) examining the possibility of launching new products that are more nutritious; (e) providing consumers with adequate and comprehensible information on products and nutrition; (f) adopting responsible marketing practices to support the strategy, in particular with regard to the promotion and marketing of foods with high saturated fat, trans fatty acid, free sugar or salt content, particularly those targeted at children; (g) adopting a label on foods that are sensitive, clear and consistent, as well as information on health-related properties that are based on scientific evidence and helping consumers make informed and healthy decisions regarding the nutritional content of foods; (h) providing national authorities with information on the composition of the foods; and (i) helping to design and implement programs to promote physical activity.

It is observed that the actions focus on the composition of the foods and how they are promoted and marketed. The changes required fall outside the scope of WHO, FAO, nongovernmental organizations and governments for implementation in isolation and fall directly within the scope of the food industries (including the beverage industry) and other corporations [9].

It should be noted that, in 2008, the world’s leading food and non-alcoholic beverage industries founded the International Food and Beverage Alliance (IFBA) to promote joint and individual actions that help leverage the WHO’s global goals and strategies. The alliance between the companies General Mills, Kellogg’s, Kraft, Mars, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola and Unilever is considered the first major commitment initiative in the sector, and the report released in 2011 already showed results such as increased availability of foods fortified with micronutrients, particularly those that reach low-income populations; exceeding the individual commitments stipulated for sodium

reduction in products; high compliance, for three consecutive years, with the global policy of restricting marketing and advertising for children; promotion of discussions with the government and non-governmental organizations; continued effort to promote a healthy work environment with the elimination of tobacco consumption and adequate weight maintenance programs; benefiting thousands of people in more than 100 countries with around 400 initiatives designed to promote nutritional education, physical activity programs, or reduction of childhood overweight and obesity; continued work to improve the nutritional profile of products by reducing sensitive public health nutrients; and increasing ingredients that bring benefits to consumer health [10].

The research, planning, and actions by the leading companies result in models and examples to be followed by smaller industries, whose revenues prevent greater investments. In this sense, the activities developed by the IFBA and other alliances are capable of having an even more significant impact on the industrialization and marketing of foods and beverages across the world.

Regarding Brazil, it is observed that the 10 largest retail packaged food companies (Nestlé, BRF, Mondelez, Danone, Unilever, PepsiCo, Bunge, LBR, Cargill, M Dias Branco), according to the 2012 retail sale value, showed the potential to generate health promotion actions with significant impact among the population, as the group's annual revenue was nearly 10 times higher than the entire budget for the biennium 2012-2013 of the World Health Organization, which is responsible for programs with a global scope [11,12].

There is evidence of the commitment of the largest food industries in Brazil to corporate social responsibility, including engagement in health promotion and improvement of the quality of life of employees, their families, the local community and society as a whole, as recommended by the WHO. It is also possible to observe that most of these industries are committed to the promotion of children's health, mainly through nutritional education actions and the development of products with a healthier nutritional profile [13].

In general, the 10 largest packaged food companies in Brazil show their commitment to the adoption of voluntary codes of conduct for advertising and food promotion for children. The voluntary commitment entered into by these corporations contributed to the Brazilian standards of quality to reach the same level as those practiced in the United Kingdom and surpassing those executed in the United States and the European Union. It is also possible to identify the effort by these companies to establish strategic alliances and public-private partnerships, with the aim of gathering sufficient resources and knowledge to face the complex challenges of nutrition and public health in the country [13].

Also with regard to the food supply, it should be noted that consumers are looking for tasty, healthier, cheaper products that deliver convenience and, on occasion, solely the feeling of pleasure. Therefore, the food and beverage industries face the tough challenge of meeting complex and conflicting demand while, at the same time, making a profit.

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