

## Books

### Political complicity in junk food industry tactics

Fear and opportunity partly underpin the tactics of the beverage and food industries. Sales of sugar-sweetened beverages, for instance, have fallen by about 25% during the past 20 years in many high-income countries (HICs). To counteract such a decrease in sales in HICs, companies have focused their attention on opportunities in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs). This is the backdrop to Eduardo J Gómez's compelling book *Junk Food Politics: How Beverage and Fast Food Industries Are Reshaping Emerging Economies*, which looks at six country case studies from China, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa.

Gómez describes how over the past 30 years, the introduction of free-market reforms, a rising middle class, a desire for foreign direct investment, and increased availability of ultra-processed foods made many LMICs fertile ground for junk food sales. Companies such as Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé, and others wasted no time in exploiting these opportunities to increase sales. Today, the Coca-Cola Company generates more than half of its sales outside HICs, Mexico consumes 86% more sugar-sweetened beverages per person than the USA, and the ultra-processed food industry is growing by 19% per year in India. Gómez examines how these trends are shaped by the tactics of the beverage and food industries. In 1991, a former director of the Coca-Cola Company, Donald Keough said "when I think of Indonesia—a country on the equator with 180 million people, a median age of 18, and a Muslim ban on alcohol—I feel I know what heaven looks like."

That capitalist heaven has inevitably given way to health-care hell. The obese population in China tripled between 2004 and 2014 and diabetes affects 4.5 million people in South Africa and claims about 80 000 lives a year in Mexico. Similar stories are seen in all the countries that Gómez discusses

in his book. Growing evidence has shown that junk food industries have contributed to the non-communicable

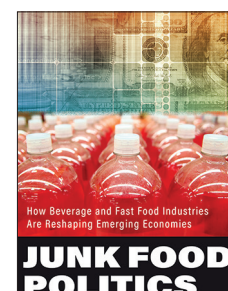
**"Gómez insists that government complicity has meant that 'junk food politics is a two-way street. Industries and governments' interests have collided in mutually reinforcing and beneficial ways. But this has occurred at the expense of impairing the health and prosperity of our most innocent and vulnerable populations'."**

disease (NCD) burden in LMICs, with children and people living in poverty disproportionately affected. As Anna Gilmore and colleagues wrote in the *Lancet* Series on the commercial determinants of health: "it is the practices and not just the products of major commercial entities that can harm health and widen inequities both within and between countries".

These practices are detailed by Gómez in his new analytical framework called "Industry Politics and Complementary Institutions" (IPCI). IPCI integrates broader historical context with industrial tactics to steer politics and restructure society, resulting in increased legitimacy and influence for industry with concurrent stagnation in regulatory action. Gómez argues this situation is only possible due to the "Complementary Institutions": politicians and leaders who have "pursued and accepted junk food industries as vital partners in helping [them to] achieve their alternative political, economic and social welfare objectives". Within his IPCI framework, Gómez details how the unique contexts of his chosen LMICs have been manipulated by junk food industries to further their agendas. In Mexico, for example, Vicente Fox, the President

of Mexico from 2000 to 2006, came into power with an agenda to boost the national economy and alleviate poverty and hunger. As a former Chief Executive of Coca-Cola Latin America, "during his presidential campaign, [Fox] benefitted greatly from the support of friends at Coca-Cola...he returned the favour by not only ensuring Coca-Cola's and other companies' prosperity but also avoiding...the first attempt to impose a tax on soda products containing sugarcane in 2003", writes Gómez. *Junk Food Politics* reveals how political alliances with junk food industries have been embedded into the Mexican political landscape. After Fox, the administrations of Felipe Calderón and subsequently Enrique Peña Nieto partnered with PepsiCo and Nestlé, respectively. Such behaviour is not isolated to LMICs. Many political leaders have bought into the neoliberal notion that to boost economic growth they must regulate lightly, work with industry, and reduce state interference to a minimum.

Gómez shows how junk food industries engage in partnerships to further education and promote hygiene, healthy lifestyles, or physical activity, while their practices and products contribute to increasing rates of obesity and NCDs. In India the Nestlé Healthy Kids Programme was launched "to create and raise awareness regarding good...nutritional content of foods and physical fitness among students". Within Gómez's IPCI framework, he argues that such activities increase junk food industries' legitimacy and reputation as responsible guardians over health-related issues. Just as the fossil fuel, tobacco, and alcohol industries have done before, the beverage and food industries have shaped the narrative to focus on personal responsibility and away from broader regulatory and political action that would reduce their



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profits. Governments, reluctant to break ties with powerful allies, go along with the plan. In India, for example, part of a US\$11 million donation from PepsiCo went to an education and exercise-oriented Get Active programme that “covered 300 000 children across 10 cities and 350 schools in 2009”. Gómez also documents local action made by the same junk food industries to increase sales, access hard-to-reach and rural communities, and broaden their influence, including in Brazil where Nestlé employed door-to-door salespeople to sell the company’s products and offer buyers a month-long payment period to complete purchases.

As Gómez goes on to explore, industry tactics pervade other sectors including academia and the media. Foundations such as ConMéxico, whose supporters include Coca-Cola, financed the work of Mexican economists who produced reports stating that soda tax would not substantially reduce soda consumption. Other companies have supported research that has downplayed the links between junk food consumption and NCDs. Influencing research through funding think tanks and academics is a strategy that has been used previously by the fossil fuel, tobacco, and alcohol industries.

Gómez underlines that such junk food tactics leave little room for individual agency to choose healthy options. In China, Gómez describes how 71.9% of China Central Television adverts were aimed at children, and of these, 47.6% were for food and beverages. Co-opting

Disney characters, encouraging children to collect free toys, and tactical product placement are only some of the ways in which these industries captivate their youngest audience. The results are shocking, for instance, research has shown that 70% of schoolchildren in low-income areas of Guerrero state, Mexico, consume sugar-sweetened beverages for breakfast. Gómez calls out governments for dragging their feet. For example, although Mexico was lauded as the first nation to create a national soda and snack tax in 2014, this came almost a decade after the initial 2003 proposal for a tax on sugarcane-based soda products, which was blocked by then-president Fox. There is still no tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in many countries, including Brazil and China. After delaying the introduction of industry regulation, enforcement is often patchy. Children are not protected from junk food industries via school sales or marketing in many countries, including China, Indonesia, and South Africa. Gómez writes that “it is as if the government wants to do everything it can to curtail these public health challenges as long as they do not threaten industries’ interests and growth potentials”.

Gómez skilfully provides concrete examples to illustrate his condemnation of government and industry practices and has no qualms about calling out individuals by name. However, he draws a less clear picture of the way ahead and how governments can disentangle themselves from

long-lasting partnerships with junk food industries. He challenges the personal responsibility exercise agenda propagated by industry and emphasises that physical activity initiatives should be in addition to regulatory policies to tax junk foods, restrict sales to children, deliver reliable and informative food labels, and reduce advertising and promotion of junk food products. He convincingly suggests that holistic policies uniting these approaches are the most sustainable and reliable way to curb the increasing burden of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. He adds that future policies should “not only [focus] on helping individuals make wiser choices and be better informed about good food and nutrition but also [safeguard] these individuals from industry manipulation and influence through the power of government law”. Gómez insists that government complicity has meant that “junk food politics is a two-way street. Industries and governments’ interests have collided in mutually reinforcing and beneficial ways. But this has occurred at the expense of impairing the health and prosperity of our most innocent and vulnerable populations”. It is time for governments to confront the tactics of junk food industries and prioritise health-care needs in holistic and sustainable ways.

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## Virtually forgotten: telehealth and its histories

Along with nearly every doctor I knew, during the COVID-19 pandemic I was thrust into the strange world of virtual medicine. For many of my paediatric patients with autism spectrum disorder, for whom an hour in clinic can be challenging, this turned out to be a good thing and online the parents and I could have a genuine conversation. Still more importantly, I was able to see where

these families lived—one mother took me on a virtual tour showing the holes her child had kicked into the wall plaster. But for another set of families, virtual medicine was very different, especially for those living on low incomes without reliable internet access. We often settled for a telephone call, sometimes while parents were in the car. Telehealth, it turned out, was a breakthrough for only

some of my patients. My colleagues and I bore it all as best we could, and tried to be patient. After all, this was brand new technology.

Wrong. As physician and historian Jeremy A Greene shows in *The Doctor Who Wasn’t There: Technology, History, and the Limits of Telehealth*, what we call telehealth has a long history. Starting with the invention of the telephone