

Food companies and nutrition for better health

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There is now broad acceptance that the future success of global health depends to a large extent upon sound nutrition and physical activity policies. Work with colleagues at the World Health Organization (WHO) convinced me that such policies need to be developed and implemented in partnership with the corporate food sector if they are to achieve maximum impact. Evidence about the negative epidemiological and economic consequences of unhealthy diets and a lack of physical activity on health increases every year and now conclusively shows that without attention to these areas, global gains in health brought about by declines in infectious diseases will be eroded by the rapid emergence of chronic diseases.

WHO and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) have responsibilities between them for developing international norms and standards for food and nutrition policy. They do this by working closely primarily with national governments. Their statements and documents have an impact on national priorities and policies. For example, WHO Technical Report Series 916 of 2003 provided the science base for implementation objectives outlined in the Global Strategy on diet, physical activity and health which was adopted by all governments in May 2007. Several of the objectives required changes in the composition of foods, in the way they are marketed and the priority that should be given to physical activity. These changes are well beyond the scope of WHO, FAO, NGOs or governments to implement alone and many fall directly within the ambit of food companies and other corporations.

Food and beverage companies have the resources and the reach, -not to mention a strong profit motive- to make products and conduct their business in ways that benefit their consumers. Taste, convenience, price and health are all elements that determine what consumers eat. Leading food and beverage companies are being increasingly judged by investors and

consumers on the basis of how they meet all these consumer needs, including health aspects, and not just on sales. Worldwide, health concerns like obesity have emerged as major drivers of which products are sold and how they are sold. NGOs, legislators and consumers seek authentic action by the companies they will support that show how they are responding to nutrition needs by changing their product portfolios and the way they are marketed.

When we look back a decade, the notion of private-public partnerships in health has not been broadly accepted. In fact, deep ideological differences led to academics who partnered with corporations (then mainly pharmaceutical companies) being subject to hostile responses. Despite this, public-private partnerships have led to new pharmaceutical products being developed and priced in ways that allow for better control of many infectious diseases; and to new ways of working in communities.

The time has come to apply knowledge of what works best to keep such partnerships focused on achieving practical outcomes to obesity and related health concerns. However, unlike so many other major public health threats, there still is no example of a sustained decline in obesity in a large population outside of a war or famine. And the trend lines in developed and developing countries remain upward. We all have our views about what would work best. We need to maintain a reasonable degree of humility about what will really work. And be open to testing different solutions.

I have always sought to work where the potential for health gain is great. It was a privilege to be at WHO when we had support to move the public health agendas on tobacco, mental health and then diet and physical activity ahead. WHO's 192 Member States adopted a resolution on diet and physical activity at WHO without adequate resources being dedicated to action. Broad based partnerships required to dent the growth of overweight and obesity are in a rudimentary stage of development in most countries.

I joined PepsiCo at a time of profound transformation for the company. For the last few years they have steadily moved to develop ways of addressing those aspects of the nutrition crisis that they have the power to influence. A Blue Ribbon Advisory Board provides high level and independent inputs to the CEO about major health and wellness policies; and internally, all business units within the globally distributed array of companies are moving towards accepting a common set of objectives that would influence the

levels of nutrients in all products, portion size, marketing and partnerships to promote physical activity.

There is no longer a need to make the case for food and beverage companies to change. Leading food companies accept the need to remove trans-fatty acids from the food supply; to reduce levels of salt, sugar and saturated fat in their products; to increase availability of fruit, vegetable, nut, grain and legume based products; and to use their marketing excellence to promote more physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption especially among children. Further, many accept that their responsibility to nutrition must include partnering with international organizations, NGOs and academics to tackle continued high levels of under nutrition and micronutrient deficiency in the world.

The magnitude of the changes required to slowdown and reverse trends in all forms of malnutrition cannot be achieved without strong and new partnerships. The most powerful untapped opportunities for partnerships involve public-corporate interaction. My experiences over the last decade suggest that significant support for change will not come from traditional sources of health development finance such as government development agencies or the major private Foundations. It needs to be embedded in new business models that promote better health and are profitable.

While each player with an interest in nutrition continues to do what they do best-more opportunities need to be created for large scale interventions explicitly aimed at harnessing resources to show what works best. Within the USA the recent announcement of \$500 million for obesity control by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is likely to push the pace of innovation. Globally, a private-public sector initiative at the level of investment of AIDS vaccines or malaria drugs seems long overdue if we are to have an impact on both under and over nutrition. For this to happen, groups who continue to disagree about the principle of working together need to look at the consequences of their inaction for health and business.

As we move forward we need to develop appropriate mechanisms of accountability for our actions. The future will judge whether the commitments and promises made by the public and private sectors have been fulfilled. No sector has the monopoly of what works best and what is in the public interest. We must learn to work together and responsibly. At the

end of the day consumers as citizens will hold us accountable for our actions or inactions.

I have been privileged to work with the most committed colleagues in the public sector. Now I am finding equally committed colleagues in the corporate sector who share the public health community's desire to make a difference to the lives of their consumers. Together lets work to make that difference.