



BIG FOOD DOSSIER:

how the industry interferes with food policies



INTRODUCITON

THE “Big Food Dossier”, how industry interferes with food policies, by ACT Promotion of Health and Idec (Brazilian Institute of Consumer Defense), provides a panoramic and systematized view of corporate political activities (CPA) and situations presenting conflicts of interest (COI) hinder and impede the progress of public agendas promoting adequate and healthy nutrition. Eight emblematic cases that recently occurred in Brazil and around the world are presented in which it is possible to identify COI, to stimulate debate on the subject and the political incidence of individual and collective actors in favor of advancing public policies aimed at ensuring the human right to adequate nutrition.

METHODOLOGY



Corporate Political activities (CPA) are attempts by companies to shape government policies in a manner favorable to private interests.

The cases described in the dossier were selected because they are part of the action agenda of the Alliance for Adequate and Healthy Nutrition and because they present **CPA** and proven **COI** situations, based on public documents. A multimethod scientific research approach was adopted, and the identified CPA were classified based on an adaptation of the categorization proposed by Mialon *et al.* (2018)¹, according to their focus on instrumental and discursive strategies. All facts mentioned in the dossier are documented, and their sources are referenced.



Institutional conflict of interest (COI): A situation in which the primary interest of the government (to protect and promote public health) may be unduly influenced by the interest of a non-state institution, affecting, or potentially affecting, the independence and objectivity of government work.



Individual conflict of interest (COI): It is a set of conditions in which professional judgment regarding a primary interest, such as patient welfare or research validity, tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain.

1. Mialon M, Julia C, Hercberg S. The policy dystopia model adapted to the food industry: the example of the Nutri-Score saga in France, *World Nutrition*: Vol 9 No 2 (2018) [acesso em 7 fev 2022]. Disponível em: <<https://worldnutritionjournal.org/index.php/wn/article/view/579/530>>.



CASES



Brazilian Dietary Guidelines

The Brazilian Dietary Guidelines (BDG), launched by the Ministry of Health in 2014, is an evidence-based official recommendation document aimed at adopting a healthy and sustainable diet. Internationally recognized, the BDG assess foods according to their degree of industrial processing, prioritizing natural and minimally processed foods. However, even before its launch, the BDG have been under attack from Big Food and Big Soda. In 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Supply (MAPA) proposed its revision, a move supported by representatives of the food and beverage industry, who sponsored scientific articles and legal efforts against the BDG's principles in an attempt to devalue it and silence its authors. This movement was countered by national and international protests, in a collective effort that managed to prevent its revision.





Nutritional labeling of packaged foods

Front-of-package nutritional labeling is an important tool to support conscious and healthy food choices. In 2014, the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa) initiated discussions with government representatives, academia, civil society, and the productive sector aiming at its improvement. As a result, a new standard for nutritional labeling of packaged foods was approved in 2020, which will come into effect in October 2022. However, the regulatory process was marked by a series of CPA from Big Food, Big Soda, and Big Agro, resulting in the approval of a model (magnifying glass) different from that advocated by civil society and academia, and different from the one presented in the public consultation by Anvisa itself. This model has low legibility and clarity of information, does not signal the presence of sweeteners, and allows several ultra-processed foods and beverages to be exempt from front-of-package labeling, solely serving industry interests.



Advertising to children and the Legal Framework for Early Childhood

Early childhood represents the first six years of a child's life, during which they form their eating habits and are already vulnerable to external influences, such as advertising to children. Although advertising to children is considered illegal under the Consumer Defense Code.



Despite being considered illegal under the Consumer Defense Code (CDC) and by the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Conanda), Big Food and Big Soda continue to develop strategies to block, hinder, and weaken its regulation. The approval of the Legal Framework for Early Childhood (MLPI), Law no. 13,257 of 2016, was a step forward in the field. However, its approval process was permeated by CPA from major corporations, which, allied with the advertising sector, forced the removal of Article 2, which prohibited "advertising aimed at children in the media, especially television, and broadcasting, between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.," among other articles, thus reducing protection for children and respect for the CDC.

Taxation of sweetened beverages

Taxation of sweetened beverages is one of the most interfered-with topics on the regulatory agenda by the industry, which relies on a hypothetical negative economic impact, while experiences in other parts of the world point to economic and social benefits. Despite being harmful to health, sweetened beverages are considered "essential products" in Brazil, which increases their tax incentives and allows their final price to be artificially low, stimulating their consumption. To prevent any reduction in these benefits, major corporations engage in various CPA, including strong lobbying, investments in biased scientific and public opinion research, and adherence to social and environmental agendas to deceptively associate their image with health and environmental protection.



National School Feeding Program (PNAE)

The National School Feeding Program (PNAE), created in 2009, is responsible for ensuring the universal and free provision of healthy meals to students and conducting food and nutrition education activities. One of its strengths is the requirement that at least 30% of the financial resources provided by the Union to states and municipalities be used to purchase seasonal products from family farming. Taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, when millions of children and adolescents stopped going to school, Big Food and Big Agro adopted various CPA to try to benefit from PNAE financial transfers. Among them are bills (PL) no. 4195/2012 and no. 3.292/2020, which aim to allocate a large part of these resources to the purchase of pork and fluid milk and to remove the priority given to purchases from family farming and vulnerable population groups, as well as proposals for program outsourcing, in an attempt to divert it for their benefit.



Donations during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, major corporations intensified their self-promotion activities disguised as philanthropy and social responsibility. Although they include the distribution of low-nutritional quality products, mostly ultra-processed food products, these activities improve the corporations' image and serve as a form of free advertising.

Due to their social nature, these activities also entail a series of tax benefits, making their cost negligible. Simultaneously, major corporations seek to interfere in public policies, such as through the Law No. 14,016/2020, which allows the donation of processed foods past their expiration date, under the guise of combating hunger and waste. Consequently, these CPA weaken the role of the State and the impactful social activities carried out by organized civil society organizations to ensure the right to adequate food and nutrition.

State Council of Food and Sustainable Nutritional Security of São Paulo (Consea-SP)

The State Council of Food and Sustainable Nutritional Security of São Paulo (Consea-SP) was created in 2013 to promote and ensure the right to adequate food and nutrition for the inhabitants of the state. The Conseas are important for civil society's articulation in demanding social rights, addressing issues such as the taxation of unhealthy foods and beverages, agrarian reform, land regularization, and the use of pesticides and genetically modified foods. However, in 2021, representatives of Big Food and Big Agro were elected to the positions of president and vice-president of Consea-SP, by indication of the state governor (which indicates a clear COI), turning it into a strategic instrument for social control and strengthening the food industry and agribusiness.



United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit

The UN Food Systems Summit, held in 2021 in the United States of America (USA), was supposed to propose alternatives to current food systems. However, it gained media attention for being led by representatives of Big Food and Big Agro, who began to occupy much of the space previously allocated to civil society and organized social movements. Additionally, the overall coordination of the event was delegated to the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organization that prioritizes the use of new seeds, pesticides, and agricultural inputs developed by foreign companies, which operate through lobbying with African politicians for the implementation of policies favoring industrial agriculture and neocolonialism. In this way, major corporations take over events and initiatives in favor of fair, healthy, and sustainable food systems, distorting them in favor of private economic interests.



Analysis/Conclusion

The eight cases presented in the Big Food Dossier highlight the various types of CPA from Big Food, Big Soda, and Big Agro to exert direct influence (through lobbying) and indirect influence (such as coalition building and institutional image construction before the population, for example) in favor of their economic interests. Their activities surpass regional and national borders and involve all spheres of power, replicating patterns of CPA that significantly impact public policies and illustrate the real agenda of these major corporations. Understanding the activities and actors that are interfering in food and nutrition policies in Brazil and around the world and developing strategies to protect, promote, and support adequate and healthy food systems and environments is therefore essential.