

The WHO urges governments to stand up to health-harming corporations

In 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a new landmark document that is both a review of the scientific literature and a political analysis, in the broad sense of the term, this time on the health-harming effects of the products and practices of certain sectors of industry (1-5).

The WHO Regional Office for Europe points out that few European countries are on track to achieve “Sustainable Development Goal 3.4”, a target adopted by the United Nations in 2015, to “by 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being” (5,6). The WHO considers that a major barrier to the introduction of the policies and regulations needed to achieve this public-health target stems from the influence of large corporations: “Despite the diversity in products, from health-harming products, such as tobacco, alcohol or sugar-sweetened beverages, to lifesaving medications, industries use a similar playbook to maximize profits, increase market power and create the best environment within which they can further grow. Attempts to control the negative health impact of these industries’ activities, by policies aiming to prevent noncommunicable diseases, are continuously challenged, delayed, weakened or stopped” (5).

The WHO attributed numerous deaths to these commercial activities. It estimated that, through tobacco, alcohol, processed meats, other processed foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, sugar-sweetened beverages, fossil fuel pollution and occupational deaths (through workplace injuries or exposure to occupation-related carcinogens or asthmagens), commercial products and practices cause an astounding 2.7 million deaths per year in Europe, corresponding to one-quarter of all deaths in the region. The WHO criticised the companies concerned for leveraging their economic might and political influence and using manipulative tactics to thwart regulations and public policy intended to reduce mortality from noncommunicable diseases (5).

The WHO asks policy makers to dare to confront all the consequences of the practices of the most powerful corporations: “This requires, at a minimum, that governments recognize that the primary interest of all major corporations is profit and, hence, regardless of the product they sell, their interests do not align with either public health or the broader public interest” (5).

The WHO also urges policy makers to accept the overwhelming evidence that other health-harming industries use the same methods of influence and lobbying as tobacco companies, and consequently to regulate them in the same way. Because “commercial factors (...) have a range of influences on noncommunicable diseases, including the generation of commodities, such as cigarettes and alcohol, the design of addictive and heavily marketed forms of food, the marketing of ineffective forms of cancer screening, and the promotion of cancer medicines with marginal benefit but ever-increasing prices” (5).

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References 1- Velásquez G and Boulet P “Globalization and access to drugs - Perspectives on the WTO/TRIPS agreement (revised)” WHO, Geneva 1999: 108 pages. 2- Prescrire Rédaction “Mondialisation et accès aux médicaments” *Rev Prescrire* 1999; 19 (191): 71. 3- World Health Organization “Closing the gap in a generation - Health equity through action on the social determinants of health” Geneva 2008: 256 pages. 4- Prescrire Rédaction “Lutter contre les inégalités socioéconomiques pour améliorer la santé” *Rev Prescrire* 2010; 30 (322): 568-570. 5- World Health Organization - European Region “Commercial determinants of noncommunicable diseases in the WHO European Region” Geneva 2024: 156 pages. 6- United Nations “Sustainable development goals”. www.un.org accessed 24 July 2024: 3 pages.
