



Development

The new world food and nutrition order

Usually I stay away from current issues in this column, and instead seek to share broad concepts, ideas and experiences. The item before this one, on the right size for humans, is an example. But here now I share some first thoughts arising from the proposal, as reported in *WNI* last month in *Update*, for a *Global Convention to Protect and Promote Healthy Diets* (1,2). This has been developed by Consumers International and the World Obesity Federation (CI-WOF). It is modelled on the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC) (3).

The idea for such a plan has been discussed for several years. The document has been drafted from within consumer and health organisations. Its proposal for a Framework Convention for food and nutrition is supported by professionals based in the UK, Europe and elsewhere, who are dedicated to protect and improve public health. The CI-WOF document is meant to encourage discussion and development. All this deserves sympathy and respect. Its general approach and its proposals are, however, mistaken. Here I explain why, and indicate the right way.

The global food system has become corrupted: The catastrophe

Certainly something very big has to be done. The transnational manufacturers and caterers of ultra-processed products (4) are creating and accelerating a global public health disaster, most obviously evidenced by rocketing rates of obesity and diabetes, particularly in less resourced and impoverished countries and settings.

In all this, industry as a whole is a victim. Just as with bankers and speculators, the basic corrupting factor is not industry, not even the transnationals themselves, but the current dominant political and economic ideology, a horrible neo-Darwinist mistake, that valorises greed and penalises conscientious entrepreneurs. Epidemics are symptoms of sick societies. A pandemic is a symptom of a sick system of world governance. Tinkering will do no more good than a band-aid on gangrene.

Ultra-processed food and drink products (4) are above all manufactured, advertised and promoted by vast Big Food corporations some of whose turnovers match the gross national products of middle-size countries (5). These colossal businesses with billions of dollars at the disposal of their chief executives and main boards, have the same general aims and strategies. They jostle for more sales and profit and higher share value, go for double-digit annual growth in and deeper penetration of countries

in the global South, and elbow less capitalised companies out of their way. Their products are creating sick societies throughout the world (6).

The human and financial costs of diabetes, rates of which are now rocketing in many countries, including in settings where impoverished families have to pay commercial rates for drugs, are outrageous and insupportable. The greatest burdens of obesity, diabetes and metabolic syndrome are borne by impoverished families, communities and populations who often also suffer food shortages and nutrition insecurity. The evidence against fatty, sugary or salty energy-dense snacks and sugared soft drinks, super-profitable as well as ultra-processed, consumed in the amounts now typical in the global North and much of the South, is conclusive.

Hundreds of papers and reports support these statements. They are not seriously disputed by any knowledgeable independent source. Eight references (4-11) will do here, with the references contained within them. The evidence is evident. As well as all this, fast food cultures are wasteful and exploitative. They are unsustainable and indefensible. They damage mental and emotional health, and family and social life. They erode long-established and traditional farming and food cultures and dietary patterns. They destroy people-intensive urban and rural businesses, abuse animals, and spoil the environment.

There is good reason to be angry. Indeed, there is good reason for hundreds of millions of producers, manufacturers, distributors, caterers, retailers and traders who make and sell fresh and wholesome food and food products to be outraged. Many are. What is happening to food systems throughout the world is also dangerous. It is a reason, and sometimes the trigger, for demonstrations, riots and insurrections.

The efficient cause of what now amounts to a catastrophe is the activities of unleashed and increasingly oligopolistic transnational corporations. These monsters must be stopped. The only effective action will be on a global scale, which must be radical in the exact sense of the term: it must go to the root of the matter.

Hence the concept of a framework convention on food, or diets, or junk foods, modelled on that for tobacco. Considerations like those summarised above motivate those who have prepared the CI-WOF proposal. But already its concept becomes fuzzy, because food, diets and junk food are different one from the other, and as is constantly and correctly said, food is not tobacco. With all due respect to conscientious and experienced colleagues, the CI-WOF document in anything like its present form is not a way forward.

***Educating consumers about ultra-processed products:
The wrong way***



Brushing up ultra-processed products by product reformulation liable to generate health claims, will only lead to greater penetration by transnational corporations of vulnerable countries in the South

A genial story tells of the tourist in the Irish countryside who, seeing a peasant, stops his limousine and asks the way to Sligo. The man of the soil doffs his cap and replies: 'Well sir, if I was going to Sligo, I wouldn't be going from here'. With this in mind, if the CI-WOF document is, in current jargon, a 'road-map', it is of the wrong territory. It is starting in the wrong place, and does not show the way. A new map is needed. Here are four of the reasons why.

1 Junk plus health claims

The recommendations of the CI-WOF document in its present form are mostly designed to enable consumers to make better choices of labelled and thus packaged food products. Most of these are ultra-processed and inherently unhealthy, and remain unhealthy when reformulated so as to contain less saturated fat or sugar or salt. Besides which, regulatory authorities allow the makers of many reformulated products to advertise them as if they are healthy, or even some sort of medicine (12). A policy that leads to retooled ultra-processed products being advertised with health claims will not inspire millions of people to become activists in the common interest.

2 Nutrient profiling won't work

Nutrient profiling is a guiding light for the CI-WOF document. It validates a strategy of adjusting the relative proportion of nutrients and other constituents of packaged products. This strategy was first attempted in a big way beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, with programmes backed by governments and accepted by industry to reduce fat, saturated fat and dietary cholesterol in products. This is believed to have reduced

rates of heart disease. But manufacturers poured more sugar into the products. The result we know: explosive rises in rates of obesity and diabetes. One disease was swapped for another. Now it is proposed that products should contain less fat and saturated fat, and also less sugar and salt, and little or no *trans* fats. This is a more concerted approach. But little thought is being given to what they will contain instead. Big Food corporations are not about to take salt, sugar, saturated fat and fat out of their products and put nothing else back in. They are dedicated to maximum mouth-feel, intense sensory impact, desire for more – even to the creation of products whose addictive qualities vitiate any nutrient-based approach (13,14).

Reformulation means more sophisticated use of substances and additives not now on any regulatory radar, with unforeseen results that no doubt would not be as great a disaster as *trans* fats or added sugars and syrups, but might run them close. A green light for reformulation of ultra-processed products is similar to a policy to improve public health that encourages Big Tobacco to manufacture low-tar cigarettes (12).

3 *No mention of transnationals*

In the CI-WOF document, there is no explicit reference to the transnational corporations whose policies and products are driving the obesity and diabetes pandemic, despite the fact that the WHO director-general herself persistently points this out (15,16). Why? Instead, a new term that seems to have been invented recently is used: ‘non-state actors with commercial interests’. This can be used of greengrocers or shoe repairers. Why has this term been invented and why is it being used here? And why does the document seek to ‘secure the commitment and engagement of the food and beverage industry’? (8,9). It is easy to think of reasons for this phrasing and this desire for partnership, but hard to think of a good reason.

The transnationals and their front organisations, for it is they that are being referred to, have the duty to serve the money markets and maximise their sales and profits. This is what they do. They, and the political and economic license they exploit, are the problem, and not part of the solution. Until this is recognised, specified and stated, any attempt to compare the CI-WOF document with the framework convention on tobacco control collapses.

4 *Food is not tobacco*

In any case, a policy proposal modelled on the tobacco framework convention is making a mistake. Food is indeed not tobacco. The foremost priority of any serious global policy on food and health is to be positive. It must be to protect and promote what exists that is good. This includes the long-established and traditional food systems and supplies of all regions and countries not yet overwhelmed by the ultra-processed products of Big Food (and Big Soda, Big Sugar and Big Snack).

***Protecting health established food systems:
The right way***



Theodore Roosevelt (front, centre) a century ago busted the great corporate trusts of the type now rampant, and also ensured freedoms and joys for US citizens by protection of wildernesses and parks

So if the CI-WOF document is not the way forward, what is? Here is the answer. The model is not tobacco, or what is bad that needs to be stopped. The *Framework Convention for Tobacco Control* is not the place to start. The model is the environment, the living and physical world from which authentic food systems spring. The model is what is good that needs to be protected, such as long established food cultures, gastronomic traditions, and dietary patterns based on shared meals. These all need to be known, studied, celebrated, strengthened and developed. This is the right road.

Indeed yes, global systematic serious statutory regulation needs to be imposed on transnational corporations, including those responsible for ultra-processed food and drink products – and all other transnational corporations, too. This implies a whole new attitude to industry as a whole. This won't be done by tweaking formulations of ultra-processed products. What is required is a new world order within which transnational corporations themselves, not merely their products, are restricted, restrained, regulated. Can this be done? It must be done.

Return to Roosevelt

The whole overall task has to be undertaken and achieved positively, in the spirit that has created protected wildernesses and parks, strictly regulated for the pleasure, freedom and enjoyment of all people. Thus, the national parks of the USA, a kind of re-creation of the commons for recreation, did not come about by chance. The inspiration and the vision was that above all of Theodore Roosevelt, who as US president busted the corporate trusts, and who in May 2008 summoned a meeting of

state governors and many other notables, including the vastly wealthy industrialist Andrew Carnegie, to the White House for a Conservation Conference. (17). Here they are, above (all men, as then customary).

The people of the US have been able to enjoy the wonders of the land where they live ever since, largely because of what was safeguarded then and later. This positive spirit can inspire a new world food system for the benefit of all. This includes industry as a whole, which needs regulation in its own interests just as surely as children need protection against exploitation.

The right way forward is to recognise, valorise and rally all public interest organisations and social movements who love food and where it comes from, and all it means. These include very many millions of parents, citizens and voters, and also very many elected and appointed officials who are ready to fight for a better world.

The right way is also to inspire and engage almost all sectors of the food industry in the full sense of the word. This includes representatives of the hundreds of millions of farmers, distributors, wholesalers, caterers, restaurateurs, retailers, traders and writers whose livelihoods and self-respect derive from supply and support of good healthy food, typically made into fresh meals enjoyed in company. Here are the food industries that need to be nourished as partners, and on whose support any great endeavour to transform the world's food systems and supplies and thus dietary patterns depends. They are many. The transnational corporations are few.

In such ways a transformed food system can be one part of a transformed system of world political and economic governance, without which no great endeavour for the common good can succeed. So where is our Theodore Roosevelt? He or she may come from an unexpected place.

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