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NUTRITION POLICIES TAKEN HOSTAGE BY MULTINATIONALS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: THE OBESITY AND DIABETES EPIDEMIC IN MEXICO

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The obesity and diabetes epidemic in Mexico has reached catastrophic dimensions. One third of children and teenagers are overweight or obese. The same problem affects seven in ten adults, 14% of who have been diagnosed with diabetes and 40% with metabolic syndrome. Over the last six years, half a million Mexicans have died of diabetes. Mortality rates linked to this disease tripled between 1980 and 2005, and 90,000 people annually have one of their limbs amputated. 15% of the national health budget covers problems created by inadequate diets, and, if the current trend does not change, this figure will surpass 35% in ten years.² This situation has been exacerbated over the last 20 years by the entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).³ This allows huge imports of ultra-processed foods with a high content of sugar, fat and salt, and low in fiber. During the same period the Mexican Government has encouraged the creation of, and investment in, large food corporations, thus, multiplying their influence and sales.⁴

The traditional food culture has been eroded to such an extent that nowadays most of the calorie intake of preschool children comes from processed foods, and 12% from bottled beverages.⁵ Children are exposed to intensive advertising of unhealthy products, mainly pastries, soft drinks and sweets.⁶ On average each Mexican consumes 163 liters of soft drinks annually; a figure higher than any other country.⁷ Breast-feeding, one of the most effective ways of preventing obesity, has dramatically decreased: 85% of babies less than six months old are fed formula with a high level of added sugar; sugar levels are particularly high in formulas used after the first six months of life.⁸ The promotion of breast milk substitutes is practically unlimited as producing companies have been allowed to finance and participate, together with different institutions, in educational activities aimed at mothers and health care professionals.⁹

Despite the fact that the Government has expressed concerns regarding this situation, it has not taken the necessary measures to fulfill its responsibility to protect the population through effectively regulating the marketing of high caloric industrialized products flooding the country. Instead, the Government has established alliances with multinational food corporations within the framework of the National Crusade against Hunger (*Cruzada Nacional contra el Hambre*, CNH). This is the Government's largest social program and is aimed at the most vulnerable groups. Its goal is to promote better nutrition and reduce undernutrition, which still affects 18% of children. The Swiss multinational corporation Nestlé cooperates with the Government in a project called My Sweet Business (*Mi Dulce Negocio*), under which 15,000 women are trained to prepare and sell desserts door-to-door as a means of self-employment, and providing nutritional education to the population.¹⁰ This is clearly an action contrary to the fight against obesity and diabetes.

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- 2 Jose A. Córdova-Villalobos *et al.*, "Las Enfermedades Crónicas no Transmisibles en México: Sinopsis epidemiológica y prevención integral." *Salud Pública de México* 50 (2008): 419–427.
- 3 Cedeño Arana, Marcos. "Inequality and Dependence in Post-NAFTA Rural Mexico." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2012): 71–73. Available at: www.rfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rfn-watch.org/ENGLISH/pdf/Watch_2012/R_t_F_a_N_Watch_2012_eng_web_rz.pdf#page=71.
- 4 Ping Zhang *et al.*, "Global Healthcare and Expenditure on Diabetes for 2010 and 2030." *Journal on Diabetes Research and Clinical Practice* 87 (2007): 293–301. See also: Juan Pablo Gutiérrez *et al.*, *Encuesta Nacional de Salud y Nutrición 2012*. Cuernavaca, Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública, 2012.

- 5 Dinora González-Castell *et al.*, "Alimentos Industrializados en la Dieta de los Preescolares Mexicanos." *Salud Pública de México* 49 (2007): 345–356.
- 6 Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública. *Publicidad de Alimentos y Bebidas*. Cuernavaca, México: Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública, 2013. Available at: www.insp.mx/epppo/blog/2984-publicidad-alimentos-bebidas.html.
- 7 For more information on the work of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut, please visit: www.uconnruddcenter.org. See also: Tatiana Andreyeva *et al.*, "Exposure to Food Advertising on Television: Associations with Children's Fast Food and Soft Drink Consumption and Obesity." *Economics and Human Biology* 9 (2011): 221–235.
- 8 Calvillo, Alejandro, Xaviera Cabada and Kati García. *La Alimentación Industrializada del Lactante y Niño Pequeño, el Nuevo Mega Negocio*. Mexico City: El Poder del Consumidor, 2013.
- 9 Some of the provisions of the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes (1981) have been integrated in the national legislative framework. However, the Government has signed several agreements for the self-regulation of companies, and currently no sanctions exist. For more information on the role of companies in nutritional education, see article "The 'Business of Malnutrition': The Perfect Public Relations Cover for Big Food" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.
- 10 Official Agreement between Nestlé and the Government of Mexico. Mexico City: April 9, 2013. Available in Spanish at: www.sedesol.gob.mx/work/models/SEDESOL/Resource/545/1/images/CONVENIO_NESTLE%20.pdf.
- 11 This is based on information compiled by OBSCLUDES in February/March 2015.
- 12 This alliance is comprised of 27 civil society organizations. For more information, please visit: www.alianza salud.org.mx.
- 13 Yale, Israel and Teresa Moreno. "Legal Prohibir en Escuelas la "Comida Chatarra": Juez." *24 Horas*, March 26, 2015. Available at: www.24-horas.mx/legal-prohibir-en-escuelas-la-comida-chatarra-juez/.
- 14 Ministry of Health. *National Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Overweight, Obesity and Diabetes*. Mexico City: Ministry of Health, September, 2013. Available in Spanish at: promocion.salud.gob.mx/dgps/descargas1/estrategia/Estrategia_con_portada.pdf.
- 15 World Bank. "Seis Millones de Razones para Hacer Adelgazar a los Mexicanos." *World Bank – News*, February 27, 2014. Available in Spanish at: www.bancomundial.org/es/news/feature/2014/02/27/diabetes-mexico.
- 16 For more information, please visit: Cedeño Arana, Marcos and Xaviera Cabada. "Bitter Reality Fuelled by Sugar: Higher Risks and Threats for Indigenous Peoples in Mexico." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2012): 46–48. Available at: www.rftn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rftn-watch.org/ENGLISH/pdf/Watch_2012/R_t_F_a_N_Watch_2012_eng_web_rz.pdf#page=46.
- 17 El Poder del Consumidor. *Necesaria una Revolución Alimenticia en México*. Mexico City: El Poder del Consumidor, 2015. Available in Spanish at: elpoderdelconsumidor.org/saludnutricional/necesaria-una-revolucion-alimenticia-en-mexico.

The CNH also includes the annual transfer of US \$322 million of public funds through 717,000 Without Hunger (*Sin Hambre*) cards to those living in poverty to enable them to acquire 15 products. Multinational food corporations produce half of these products, including soluble coffee, chocolate powder, oat cereals, canned chili peppers and milk powder.¹¹ With these transfers, the program helps replace local foods with processed foods, creating huge profits for the companies. So far this initiative has had little effect on reducing malnutrition.

Large corporations, through the creation of public-private alliances and intense lobbying efforts in the Mexican Congress, have repeatedly boycotted any attempts to regulate the marketing of processed foods, especially those targeting children. It was thus very important that, despite the companies' efforts to avoid it, the initiative pushed by the Food Health Alliance¹² (*Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria*) to tax consumption of sugared drinks was approved at the end of 2013. It was also proposed that the revenue raised with this tax be used to provide drinking water at public schools, and to prevent and treat chronic diseases. However, the Government's response to this has been slow and insufficient. A law banning the sale of soft drinks in schools was adopted on May 16, 2014. While soft drinks companies tried to appeal against Congress's decision, their appeal was eventually overturned.¹³

Nevertheless, corporations have been successful in influencing the process. This influence has resulted in the misleading and confusing labeling of foods and non-alcoholic beverages. Moreover, the industry has actively prevented the commitments in the National Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Overweight, Obesity and Diabetes from being fulfilled.¹⁴ This has been facilitated by the lack of oversight or sanction mechanisms that would ensure compulsory compliance.

One in three children born in Mexico after 2010 will develop diabetes if the necessary preventive measures are not implemented.¹⁵ The Government of Mexico must limit the influence that it has unduly granted to large food corporations, as this is incompatible with its responsibility to protect citizens and ensure their rights.

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Encouraging the Consumption of Traditional and National Foods and Beverages with the Campaign "Healthier Eating as Mexicans Eat"

The consumption of bottled sugared beverages is especially high in indigenous regions where soft drink companies encourage the consumption of their products by using monopolistic practices and reducing the price instead of applying the consumption tax approved by Congress.¹⁶ This measure, besides contributing to the increase in diabetes, promotes the consumption of soft drinks and undermines the consumption of traditional beverages that have an important cultural and nutritional value.

As a response to this situation, the project *Alimente*, the Training and Education Centre of Ecology and Health for Peasants (CEESC) and *El Poder del Consumidor* have launched the campaign "Healthier Eating as Mexicans Eat" (*Más Sanos Comiendo como Mexicanos*).¹⁷ The campaign aims to recover the prestige of, and promote, the consumption of natural water and traditional Mexican food and beverages, particularly the *pozol*, which is a nutritious and refreshing drink produced with maize. The campaign's goal is to reduce the consumption of bottled soft drinks by 50% in five years.