

March blog

Fabio Gomes



Here I am in Rio de Janeiro at 8.30 in the morning, and the temperature is 38 degrees centigrade (that's 100 degrees, for colleagues in the USA) and rising. I'm cooling myself with the fresh juice of one of the tastiest fruits of the summer here: pineapple.

In Brazilian common language *abacaxi*, the word for pineapple, also means something difficult, or a tricky situation, probably because of the razor-sharp thorns that protect the plant from predators. But inside, the fruit is sweet, refreshing, and super delicious; nourishment for body and soul. Its origin is in the lowlands of Brazil. Given its nature, perhaps it should be our national fruit.

As is the nature of a blog, in this regular column I'll be commenting informally and sometimes a bit more formally on news and events I come across or am engaged with, every month. Please respond with your own comments, using the facility below. Please also send me information and contacts. The editors have asked me to write from my own position about what I know best, which means you'll be getting the views of a public health nutritionist at the beginning of his career who is coming from the South, and specifically from Brazil. For more about me, please refer to the members' profiles section of this website.

Legislation

Action to protect health

News from last month is that on World Cancer Day, 4 February, the first Executive Summary derived from the World Cancer Research Fund/ American Institute for Cancer Research 2009 policy report (1), itself developed from the WCRF/AICR 2007 diet and cancer report (2) was launched here at the Brazilian National Cancer Institute (INCA) in Rio. This *Políticas e Ações para Prevenção do Câncer no Brasil: Alimentação, Nutrição e Atividade*, constructed in partnership with INCA, highlights Brazil's own national policy and action priorities to prevent cancer and other chronic diseases. It also summarises good practices in which Brazil is playing a leading part. These include the provision of fresh locally produced meals for schoolchildren; the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding; and the proposal currently under consideration by our government to regulate unhealthy food marketing, most of all to children.

All these practices involve legislation, used in the public interest to align all actors, to protect the rights and entitlements of citizens, to ensure that industry acts ethically, and to launch processes radically, quickly and effectively. Here is a clear example of the political dimension of nutrition, usually invisible to most professionals in the field, from graduate students to authorities on food and nutrition.

Transnational food and drink industries

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The need for prayer, José Maria Bengoa.
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The next big one

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NEW MONTHLY BLOG



Fabio Gomes

The big heat in Rio. Pineapples.
Policies to prevent cancer in Brazil.

Now for a big topic which I expect I'll be touching on also in future columns. This is the impact of the transnational food, drink and associated industries on public health, on the standing of our profession, and in many other dimensions. Yes, I know this is a topic that concerns many of us. It certainly concerns me and many of my colleagues in Brazil also. Let's hear, in response to this column.

You probably go to a number of nutrition conferences and other events. Recent congresses I have attended have included that of the International Union Against Cancer (UICC) in Geneva, and of the Latin American Nutrition Associations (SLAN) in Santiago de Chile. Perhaps being young I am simply being naïve, but to me the conspicuous presence of Nestlé, Kellogg, Danone, Unilever, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and other transnational companies at nutrition conferences is inexplicable. Well, I can think of a number of reasons, but I can't think of a good one. Can you imagine, that at the Santiago conference last November, delegates descending from the upper light and airy floor dominated by the great hall of commercial exhibits, to the twilight, humid and even faintly mouldy basement rooms where most of the presentations took place, had to walk down a staircase marked with red footprints advertising Coca-Cola's commitment to physical activity? Probably you can imagine this. Maybe you were there.

But with many colleagues, I don't think such travesties are the main issue. At nutrition conferences, can you feel confident that most sessions and presentations are free from commercial and other inappropriate influence? What are we to think when senior executives from companies such as those mentioned above, or their representative or associated organisations, give presentations as if they are dispassionate scientists? Is this the result of some sort of deal? And where are nutrition scientists themselves coming from? These days, how many universities and their departments, and how many research projects, are free from industry funding with explicit or implicit conditions? Nobody knows, but it's safe to say that the proportion is decreasing. Could money be found for a research project to name the people and to know the numbers, with time trends?

Then there is the issue of the 'revolving door' between government, the academic world, and industry. How many senior and influential executives working for United Nations agencies, national governments, and how many senior scientists, are groomed or groom themselves especially as retirement age approaches, to work for firms whose products, consumed in typical quantities, are harmful to health, and whose practices ravage the environment, drain water supplies, make prodigal use of energy, and wipe out national and local businesses? Nobody knows, but it's safe to say that the proportion is increasing. Again, could money be found for a research project to name the people and to know the numbers, with time trends? And could we expect the results of such projects to be the subject of plenary presentations at nutrition congresses?

Taxation of soft drinks

Generating Pepsi

In January, the journal *BusinessWeek* ran a story (3) featuring Derek Yach, a high-profile public health physician with a distinguished record in tobacco control. In the period when Gro Harlem Brundtland was director-general, up to 2004, he was an executive director at the World Health Organization in Geneva. At WHO he had direct responsibility for its 2003 technical report #916 on diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases. (4) This identifies 'high intake of energy-dense micronutrient-poor foods' as a convincing cause of weight gain and obesity, and 'heavy marketing of energy-dense foods' and 'high intake of sugars-sweetened soft drinks' as probable causes. As we all know, obesity itself evidently increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, common cancers and other diseases.

In early 2007 Dr Yach moved to PepsiCo, where he is a senior Vice-President responsible for global health policy. In between these appointments he was a director at the Rockefeller Foundation and a professor at Yale University. The story was picked up in the Brazilian business press also.

In the story he is quoted giving the first reaction of his mother to his Pepsi appointment. She said: 'You're aware that they sell soda and chips, and other things that cause you to get unhealthy and fat?' Good question. In response, he explained that his mission, as an aide to PepsiCo chief executive officer Indra Nooyi, was to encourage Pepsi to make and sell healthier products. This is an ambitious task, because the first responsibility of any business is to its stockholders and to its bottom line.

One way in which the overall nutritional profile of the products of soft drinks manufacturers can change for the better, is by means of legislation that limits or

Public health law. Pepsi and PepsiCo.
Taxing soft drinks – a good idea! ✨

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prohibits marketing of unhealthy products to children, thus creating a 'level playing field'. Another way, mentioned as a possibility by President Obama, is to tax soft drinks such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. This is not a particularly radical idea. In a sense, a tax would cancel out the subsidy given to the producers of high-fructose corn syrup, the caloric ingredient of cola drinks in the USA. It also could raise a massive revenue that could be sequestered for public health promotion. On average, everybody in the USA consumes 50 gallons of soda – cola and other soft drinks – every year, and a tax of 3 cents on every 12 ounce can sold, would raise over \$US 50 billion over ten years. That's right, \$US 50,000,000,000. (5) Would this dent Coke and Pepsi profits? Maybe.

Dr Yach is unenthusiastic about such proposals. Quoted in the New York Times (5) he says: 'Simply pricing one product higher would lead to unknown effects on usual dietary consumption. It may even lead to worse situations: people may stop spending on one food and eat more of another, so taxing high levels of sugar may lead to eating higher levels of fat'.

This argument is not to be found in the 2003 WHO report, but Dr Yach is of course entitled to change his mind. One way to examine his argument is by analogy. Thus, a senior executive working for a cigarette manufacturer (whose products were supported by subsidies for tobacco farmers) might say – and maybe has said – 'A tax on cigarettes would be dangerous. It could cause a rise in the number of heroin and crack cocaine addicts'. (Or even 'Without the calming effect of cigarettes, rates of mayhem and murder might soar', but let's not get too fanciful). Yes, we know that soft drinks are not cigarettes, and that nobody inhales cola unless drinking and laughing at the same time, but the analogy holds. One solution to Dr Yach's concern would be to levy similar taxes on fatty, salty snacks such as those made by PepsiCo, Kraft and other manufacturers of food-like products, according to their levels of fat and of salt. Perhaps he would say in response that this would be taxing the poor, who should not be deprived of life's simple comforts in these troubled times.

It's later in the day in Rio now and the temperature is 43.9 degrees, which is 111 Fahrenheit, an all-time February record for this city. It's time to look up the latest estimates and projections for the contribution of the transnational food, drink and associated industries to climate change. Torrid weather is good business though. I'm drinking pineapple juice, and the *lanchonetes* (snack bars) selling fruit juices, beer, and cola drinks, are doing a roaring trade

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4. World Health Organization. Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. Report of a joint WHO/FAO expert consultation. Technical Report 916. Geneva: WHO, 2003.
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Your responses, comments or queries of any length are warmly welcomed. [Please click here.](#)

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