Diabetes has rocketed in Mexico, rates of which in Mexico are now among the highest in the world. The roots of this public health emergency go deep. Here activists campaign against sugared soft drinks.

Pilar Zazueta writes:

In the March issue, WN reported about the current Mexican diabetes crisis. The healthcare and human costs of this epidemic are staggering. As stated, more than 14 percent of the Mexican population over 20 years old suffers from diabetes (1). These figures are even more alarming given how precarious health coverage is in Mexico, and how costly and sometimes inaccessible both private and public insurance are for most people. To try to remedy this situation the Mexican government approved a 10 per cent tax to try to curb the prevalence of diabetes in the country.

The roots of the crisis

The current health crisis is not only due to the North American Free Trade Agreement that opened up Mexico to transnational corporations, as claimed in WN (1). It is also because of much longer-term developments of the soft drink industry and changes in food consumption patterns. The tax is certainly a triumph for health advocates, but given the recent history of the Mexican food system, it will probably by itself be inadequate to reduce the noxious effects of current Mexican dietary patterns.

Health authorities have been warning Mexicans about the dangers of unhealthy levels of sugar consumption since at least the 1960s. Salvador Zubirán, founder of the National Institute of Nutrition – which now bears his name – did pioneering studies in low income housing developments in Mexico City, together with Adolfo Chavez.
Through these studies carried out half a century ago, he learned that the incidence of type 2 diabetes was rapidly on the rise (2). Industrialisation, changes in family structure and the increasing employment of women outside the home had resulted in drastic changes in dietary patterns, including that families were no longer cooking at home and were buying more processed foods.

Among the most popular ultra-processed products in Mexico are soft drinks. The soft drink industry in Mexico began as long ago as the late nineteenth century. As part of the import substitution industrialisation (ISI) model, first implemented in the 1930s, US based corporations partnered with existing local entrepreneurs to open more bottling plants in the country (3). The soft drink industry in Mexico was one of the sectors in which the rule that limited foreign equity participation in Mexican industries to less than 50% was actually enforced. As the business model of transnational soft drink companies was based on the franchise, none of them complained.

Unsafe water

FEMSA, Latin America’s largest Coca-Cola bottler, was a child of ISI. This company was and is one of the most powerful industrial trade groups in Mexico. Since the 1940s, attempts to increase taxes on soft drinks have been resisted by small and medium sized bottlers. For example, President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) received thousands of telegrams from bottlers, small shopkeepers, and soft drink distributors when he tried to raise taxes on soft drinks. This mobilisation occurred at least five more times during the last century. Soft drink producers portrayed themselves as ‘protectors of public health’, given that water services in urban and rural Mexico were so deficient (3). Mexico has very low total tax revenues as a proportion of its gross domestic product, so public investment in water services continue to be insufficient even today. It is this history that leads a lot of people to think about soft drinks as ‘healthy’ water sources.

Also there is symbiosis between sugar producers and bottlers. In the last century and a half, local sugar industries became increasingly dependent on soft drink producers as buyers. As some of Mexico’s most radical insurgent groups and unions, including Emiliano Zapata’s army in Morelos, rose up and organised in sugar producing areas, the government always paid special attention to that sector. The state invested and subsidised sugar production to stop civil war and maintain peace (4). For this reason also, even after signing the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Mexican sugar industry has received special consideration and protection.

In 2006, while doing fieldwork in Mexico, I met with the members of the cooperative Refrescos Pascual. This worker cooperative, very popular in Mexico City, owns and manages a successful business that manufactures soft drinks and juices. Cooperative members, who have spearheaded campaigns against unethical business practices by Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, were set against any initiative that increased taxes on soft-drinks. Hundreds of small fruit producers around Mexico depend on Refrescos Pascual.
That year, the cooperative, with fruit producers, marched together to congress and met with members of all three major parties to lobby against the tax reform (5).

**A complex crisis**

These are the types of challenges that proponents of the soft drink tax have faced. The recently approved taxes on soft drinks and fruit juices with added sugar in Mexico will certainly be a powerful incentive to reduce consumption. A preliminary study by the National Institute of Public Health and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill indicates that demand for soft drink has decreased with the tax (6). Nonetheless, soft drink consumption is still too high, and research so far indicates that consumption has been only reduced in urban zones, not in rural ones (7).

Health authorities, public health experts and civil society organisations must find creative ways to succeed. They have to live with the size of the soft drink industry and the fact that successive Mexican governments are corporate-friendly.

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