

Intervention by Infact to the 113th Session of the WHO Executive Board Agenda Item 3.7: Integrated Prevention of Noncommunicable Diseases

Infact welcomes the proposed Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. As a corporate accountability organization, we particularly applaud the emphasis in the Strategy on provision of accurate information to consumers, and the recognition that food advertising affects food choices and influences dietary habits. Encouraging WHO Member States to curtail advertising of unhealthy food is consistent with the finding in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) that tobacco advertising bans reduce consumption, and with the inclusion of a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship in the first global health and corporate accountability treaty.

In light of the precedents of the FCTC, however, Infact is concerned about the failure to insulate the Global Strategy from potential conflicts of interest. Throughout the FCTC negotiating process, WHO excluded the tobacco corporations, their subsidiaries and affiliates on the grounds that their aims run counter to those of the treaty. The final text obligates parties to protect public health policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry. These provisions in the FCTC represent an important evolution in the global community's attitude to the deliberate production, distribution and marketing of a dangerous and deadly product.

While WHO has made no distinction among so-called "stakeholders" in the Global Strategy, evidence is now emerging that the food industry is aggressively attempting to water down the Strategy. The assertion that marketing of energy-dense food does not increase the risk of obesity is eerily reminiscent of the tobacco giants' insistence that tobacco marketing doesn't increase consumption. In both cases, multibillion-dollar corporate advertising budgets draw these claims into question. And there is a corporate connection between the two issues: the transnational now known as Altria owns Philip Morris, the world's most profitable tobacco corporation, and Kraft, one of the world's largest food corporations.

WHO has saluted voluntary initiatives by the food industry to limit dangerous ingredients and portion sizes. Here again, the lessons of the tobacco control movement bear scrutiny. Tobacco corporations have long sought to fend off regulation by putting forth voluntary marketing codes. Voluntary standards are non-binding, lack independent oversight, and have often proven ineffective in curbing the abusive practices they are nominally intended to address. The tobacco industry's supposed concessions even reinforce its own promotional strategy, echoing the very themes that have made the Marlboro cowboy lethally effective at addicting kids around the world.

The tobacco industry also stalled public health policies for decades, demanding more studies linking its product to death and disease—while tens of millions of people died. Where there is evidence that certain products or practices can be harmful to health, the precautionary principle must apply, shifting the burden of proof to those who seek to continue such production and promotion.

Infact urges that the proposed Global Strategy be strengthened to acknowledge the potential conflicts of interest for food corporations and other private sector actors with the Strategy's goals and objectives, and to insulate implementation of its action plan from such conflicts.