

Sugar-Coated Lies: How The Food Lobby Destroys Health In The EU

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Global Research, July 29, 2016

Over half the population of the European Union (EU) is overweight or obese. Without effective action, this number will grow substantially in the next decade warns an important new report. [‘A Spoonful of Sugar: How the Food Lobby Fights Sugar Regulation in the EU’](#), by the research and campaign group Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), notes that obesity rates are rising fastest among lowest socio-economic groups. That’s because energy-dense foods of poor nutritional value are cheaper than more nutritious foods, such as vegetables and fruit, and relatively poor families with children purchase food primarily to satisfy their hunger.

The report argues that more people than ever before are eating processed foods as a large part of their diet. Bad for health, but good for the industry because sugar-rich processed foods have the highest profit margins (unlike fruit and vegetables), and the easiest way to make industrial, processed food cheap, long-lasting and enhance the taste is to add extra sugar as well as salt and fat to products.

There is an increasing body of scientific evidence showing the key role sugar plays in fuelling rocketing rates of obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, as well as some types of cancer, and the new report argues that in cold economic terms the cost to European GDP is alarming. In the United Kingdom, the cost of obesity is estimated at £27 billion per year, and approximately seven per cent of national health spending in EU member states as a whole is due to obesity in adults. This is aside from indirect costs to societies such as sickness and early death or the impacts on carers.

So why isn’t action being taken to address this health crisis?

Simply because the food industry is able to resist regulation. The CEO report notes that the food industry has vigorously mobilised to stop vital public health legislation in this area by:

Pushing free trade agreements and deregulation drives that undermine existing laws;

Exercising undue influence over EU regulatory bodies;

Capturing scientific expertise;

Championing weak voluntary schemes; Outmaneuvering consumer groups by spending billions on aggressive lobbying.

Health policies, like mandatory sugar reductions, sugar taxes and food labels, would help consumers make healthier choices. But the leverage which food industry giants have over EU decision-making has helped the sugar lobby to see off many of these threats to its profit

margins.

The report argues that key trade associations, companies and lobby groups related to sugary food and drinks together spend an estimated €21.3 million annually to lobby the EU.

The bottom line is money and profit. This trumps any notion of public health and the public interest. CEO explains that Europe is the world's biggest food and drinks exporter, and food giant Nestlé is its most valuable corporation, valued at €208 billion – even more than Royal Dutch Shell.

The report states:

The European Commission and institutions such as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) have been far too willing to listen to industry's messages, reflecting their all too often overly close relationship with the food and drink industry.

It stresses that many of the initiatives that would help Europeans eat less sugar are weak and voluntary or challenged by the EU itself when enacted at nation state level: the capture of EU regulatory bodies is a major cause for concern.

Trade deals like TTIP and CETA could help the sugar lobby even more. The report notes that similar deals have already been used to force Mexico to pay hundreds of millions in compensation for taxing sugar.

While industry-funded studies influence European Food Standards Authority (EFSA) decisions, Coca Cola, Nestlé and other food giants engage in corporate propaganda by sponsoring sporting events and major exercise programmes to divert attention from the impacts of their products and give the false impression that exercise and lifestyle choices are the major factors in preventing poor health. The report goes on to say:

Trade lobby groups and food industry giants sponsor research into subjects such as obesity and diabetes, sometimes in partnership with the European Commission (EC). This can set industry-friendly parameters and result in publication bias. Decades of research emphasis on fat, exercise, and calorie counting has helped distract nutrition advice from the specific dangers of sugar.

The authors note that the EC Dutch Presidency of the first half of 2016 has been criticised for its Roadmap for Action on Food Product Improvement, which works hand in hand with the food industry; the Roadmap emphasises weak voluntary sugar reduction targets and public-private partnerships for industry. The report also notes that trade association FoodDrinkEurope spent approximately €1 billion in a successful campaign against a mandatory EU-wide 'traffic light' food labelling system that is most recommended by health experts and consumer groups. Food lobbyists are also mobilising PR tactics against sugar taxes.

Katharine Ainger, freelance journalist and co-author of the report says:

“So many independent scientific studies show a clear link between excessive

sugar consumption and serious health risks. But the fact that there is still no consensus on the dangers of sugar among EU regulators proves just how powerful the food and drink lobby is. Sound scientific advice is being sidelined by the billions of euros backing the sugar lobby. In its dishonesty and its disregard for people's health, the food and drink industry rivals the tactics we've seen from the tobacco lobby for decades."

The industry is able to flex its considerable financial muscle to slant science, exert political influence and mount slick PR campaigns to carry on endangering the health of hundreds of millions of Europeans. It is not the first time that CEO has shown the EC to be a willing servant of a corporate agenda. Brussels swarms with corporate lobbyists whose spending power and political influence dwarfs that of civil organisations and consumer groups.

Industry lobbyists spend millions each year for good reason. They receive a return on what is essentially a key investment: the capture and corruption of public bodies, the co-writing of legislation, the avoidance of regulation and the bringing in of trade deals like TTIP that will effectively destroy any remnants of democracy and the existing limited ability of elected representatives and governments to check corporate power. While many advocate the democratic public ownership and management of key infrastructure, such as transport, health services, banking and utility companies, not much is ever mentioned about food. But what can be more vital to society than the control of the food supply and what we eat?

From the various chemical cocktails applied to our food to low-nutrient, sugar-rich products, the food and agriculture sector is knowingly damaging our health and has been doing so for decades. The powerful corporations that belong to this sector will continue to do so because their logic and corporate business models are based on maximisation of profit at all costs and by all means possible.

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