

“A consistent stakeholder management process can guarantee the ‘social license to operate’”: mapping the political strategies of the food industry in Brazil

“Um processo consistente de gerenciamento dos *stakeholders* pode garantir a ‘licença social para operar’”: mapeando as estratégias políticas da indústria alimentícia no Brasil

“Un proceso consistente en la gestión de las partes interesadas puede garantizar la ‘licencia social para actuar’”: mapeando estrategias políticas de la industria alimentaria en Brasil

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doi: 10.1590/0102-311X00085220

Abstract

In the past, food industry actors tried to delay and weaken public health efforts to promote adequate and healthy diets in Brazil. This study aimed to identify the political strategies used by food industry actors in Brazil. We undertook a document analysis of publicly available information and interviews with eighteen key informants in public health nutrition. Data collection and analysis were carried between October 2018 and January 2019. In Brazil, food industry actors interacted with health organizations, communities, and the media. They disseminated information on nutrition and physical activity by scientific events and schools. The food industry also had allies within the government and lobbied high ranking officials. Finally, food industry actors intimidated some public health professionals, including by threats of litigation, which had the effect of silencing them. These strategies were facilitated by the use of arguments, such as the crucial role that the food industry plays in the economy and its support to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Personal responsibility, moderation, and education were cited as solutions to the obesity epidemic, and there was little discussion on the broader issue of inadequate and unhealthy diets. Food industry actors in Brazil used a diverse range of political strategies, which have the potential of negatively influencing public policy, research, and practice in the country. Learning about these strategies is an essential first step, and in response, it is crucial to develop robust mechanisms to address undue influence from corporations.

Food Industry; Public Policy; Professional Ethics

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Background

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the leading cause of mortality globally, could be prevented and controlled by the introduction of public health policies in countries ¹. In Brazil, there were proposals to restrict marketing of unhealthy foods to children, increase taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages, and implement a nutrition front-of-pack labelling on food products, as a means to limit the increased consumption of ultra-processed foods, a main risk factor for developing NCDs ^{2,3}. Brazil is a huge market for such products, with a population of 209 million people ⁴, and these policies represent a threat to the sales of the food industry. In the past, food industry actors tried to delay and weaken public health efforts to promote adequate and healthy diets. For example, they lobbied the government against the introduction of restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy products proposed by the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (ANVISA) ^{5,6}. Instead, food industry actors advocated for the adoption of self-regulation ^{6,7}.

These attempts to influence public health policies are referred to as “corporate political activity” (CPA) in the literature ^{8,9} and, for the food industry, they comprise five strategies ¹⁰: coalition management; information management; direct involvement and influence on policy; legal strategies; and discursive strategies (Box 1).

Box 1

Conceptual framework for categorising the corporate political activity of the food industry (adapted from Ulucanlar et al. ⁹ and Mialon et al. ¹⁰).

INSTRUMENTAL STRATEGIES		
	Practices	Mechanisms
Coalition management	Constituency recruitment – external – establish relationships with key opinion leaders and health organisations	<i>Establish relationship with health professionals and former policy makers and promote public-private interactions</i>
		Support professional organizations, including through funding and/or advertising in their publications
		Establish informal relationships with key opinion leaders
		Support the placement of industry-friendly personnel within health organizations
	Constituency recruitment – external – seek involvement in the community	Undertake corporate philanthropy
		Support physical activity initiatives
		Support events (such as for youth or the arts) and community-level initiatives
	Constituency recruitment – external – establish relationships with the media	Establish close relationships with media organizations, journalists and bloggers to facilitate media advocacy
	<i>Internal</i>	<i>Build alliances with other actors within the industry</i> ⁹
	Constituency fabrication	Establish fake grassroots organizations (“astroturfing”)
		Procure the support of community and business groups to oppose public health measures
	Constituency fragmentation and destabilization	Discrediting public health advocates personally and publicly, e.g. through the media, blogs
Infiltrate, monitor the operation and advocacy strategies of public health advocates, groups and organizations		
Create antagonism between professionals		

(continues)

Box 1 (continued)

INSTRUMENTAL STRATEGIES		
	Practices	Mechanisms
Information management	Production	Fund research, including through academics, ghost writers, own research institutions and front groups
	Amplification	Cherry pick data that favors the industry, including use of non-peer reviewed or unpublished evidence
		Participate in and host scientific events
		Propose industry-sponsored education
	Suppression	Suppress the dissemination of research that does not fit the industry's interests
		Emphasize disagreement among scientists and focus on doubt in science
		Criticize evidence, and emphasize its complexity and uncertainty
Credibility	<i>Fronting: concealing industry links to information/evidence, including through the use of scientists as advisers, consultants or spokespersons</i>	
Direct involvement and influence in policy	Indirect access	Lobby directly and indirectly (through third parties) to influence legislation and regulation so that it is favorable to the industry
		<i>Co-opt government officials to defend the positions of the industry⁹</i>
		Use the "revolving door", i.e. ex-food industry staff work in government organizations and vice versa
	Incentives	Fund and provide financial incentives to political parties and policy makers (donations, gifts, entertainment or other financial inducements)
	Threats	Threaten to withdraw investments if new public health policies are introduced
	Actor in government decision making	Seek involvement in working groups, technical groups and advisory groups
		Provide technical support and advice to policy-makers (including consultation)
<i>Develop public-private and self-regulation initiatives with the government</i>		
Legal actions	Use legal action (or the threat thereof) against public policies or opponents	Litigate or threaten to litigate against governments, organizations or individuals
	Influence the development of trade and investment agreements	Influence the development of trade and investment agreements such that clauses favorable to the industry are included (e.g., limited trade restrictions, mechanisms for corporations to sue governments)

(continues)

Box 1 (continued)

DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	
Domain	Argument
The economy	Stress the number of jobs supported and the money generated for the economy
Governance	Demonize the "nanny state"
Expected food industry costs	Policy will lead to reduced sales/jobs
	Cost of compliance will be high
Frame the debate on diet- and public health-related issues	Stress the good traits of the food industry
	Shift the blame away from the food industry and its products, e.g. focus on individual responsibility, role of parents, physical inactivity
	Promote industry's preferred solutions: education, balanced diets, information, public private initiatives, self-regulation (reformulation)

Note: in italic are the practices added/modified during data analysis (iterative process).

Identifying these strategies is a crucial step for informing government officials, public health professionals, and other stakeholders about the negative influence that the industry could exert within the countries. With no existing comprehensive mapping of the different CPA strategies of the food industry in Brazil, this study aimed to identify these political practices.

Methods

Data collection and analysis were carried between October 2018 and January 2019. Data analysis was revised in January/February 2020. A document analysis, triangulated with interviews, was conducted. It is important to note that, while the document analysis had a specific timeframe for the publication of the material collected, our interviewees discussed information that could have occurred at any time in their careers.

INFORMAS analysis

We used the research protocol of INFORMAS (International Network for Food and Obesity/Non-communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support. <https://www.informas.org/>) for identifying the CPA of the food industry in Brazil, using publicly available information (i.e.: step 3 of the private sector module of INFORMAS) ¹¹. Key actors in the food industry in Brazil were identified by an existing pilot study on the CPA of the food industry in Latin America ¹², and consultation with public health nutrition experts in the country. Members of the International Food and Beverage Alliance, comprising the largest global industry actors in terms of market shares, were included. Trade associations and two groups funded by the food industry were also included. These included: Coca-Cola; Danone; Ferrero; General Mills; Grupo Bimbo; Kellogg's; Mars; McDonald's; Mondelez; Nestlé; PepsiCo; Unilever; the Brazilian Association of Soft Drinks and Non-Alcoholic Beverages Industries (ABIR); the Brazilian Association of Food Industries (ABIA); the Brazilian office of the International Life Science Institute (ILSI); and the Brazilian Information Council (BRAFIG).

A list of sources of information consulted for this study is presented in Supplementary Material (S1. http://cadernos.ensp.fiocruz.br/static//arquivo/suppl-e00085220-s1_3637.pdf).

The searches were restricted to the federal level and to information published on these websites between January 1 and December 31, 2018, based on the information obtained by an existing pilot study¹². Duplicate information within and across different sources of information were only collected once. Data is available in the Supplementary Material (S2. http://cadernos.ensp.fiocruz.br/static//arquivo/suppl-e00085220-s2_5153.pdf).

Interviews

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with eighteen individuals, including one group interview with two individuals, and a follow-up interview. A former member of the food industry (n = 1) was interviewed, as well as individuals from: the executive branch of the government (n = 5), the legislative branch of the government (n = 3), civil society (n = 4), academia (n = 4), and the media (n = 1). Sampling was purposive (n = 9), and potential interviewees were identified by their public statements on the role of the political practices of the food industry in Brazil and abroad, and were first contacted by email. The snowball sampling method was also used to recruit participants (n = 9). One individual declined to participate due to time constraints, and two individuals indicated someone else who could be interviewed instead of them. Given the sensitivity of our topic and the existing treats faced by other researchers and civil society organizations who denounce the practices of the food industry in Brazil and Latin America, we decided not to approach industry actors for our study.

On the day of the interview, participants signed a consent form, in which they agreed on the digital recording of the interview, and were offered the option to review their transcript. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, at a place selected by the participants, and lasted one hour on average. Restrictions were not placed on the industry actors for which the CPA strategies were discussed, or on the timeframe during which these CPA strategies were used. The interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. The digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by contracted professionals.

Data analysis

For the analysis of both publicly available information and the interviews, a deductive approach to data analysis was used, where the first author identified relevant information on the websites cited above, and in interviews, using an existing framework for classifying the CPA practices outlined in Box 1. All data were in Portuguese or English and were managed on Microsoft Word and Excel (<https://products.office.com/>). The second author reviewed 10% of the coding and agreement was reached after discussion between the authors (but not measured). The codebook presented in Box 1 was refined, in an iterative process, during data analysis, as indicated in italic in the box.

Reporting

Illustrative examples were used, comprising text from the analyzed documents and quotations from interview participants, presented in our results section. A code starting with the letter A links to specific examples from the document analysis (Supplementary Material. S2. http://cadernos.ensp.fiocruz.br/static//arquivo/suppl-e00085220-s2_5153.pdf). Interview quotations were translated, when necessary, from Portuguese to English, by the first author. All information that could identify our interviewees was removed from their transcripts and feminine pronouns were used when quoting them. Text within brackets in quotations is our addition, for clarification, when necessary. Reporting on the specific influence of the industry on the front-of-pack labelling policy is the subject of a separate manuscript. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Public Health of the University of São Paulo, Brazil (project number 07944118.7.0000.5421).

Results

We found 304 examples of CPA practices used by the food industry in Brazil with the INFORMAS protocol: 194 examples of instrumental strategies and 113 examples of discursive strategies (these categories are not mutually exclusive). Some of these examples were also discussed by our interviewees, and they also shared additional examples. In terms of industry actors, most examples in publicly available information were found for Coca-Cola (n = 58), a company that was also regularly cited by our interviewees, as well as Nestlé and McDonald's, which may mean that they are the most active actors in terms of CPA, or/and have more resources than other actors to use CPA practices. However, no conclusions should be drawn here because it may also mean that other actors are not transparent in their use of CPA, and not necessarily that they are not using these practices.

Box 2 shows a specific case study of the local branch of the ILSI, using the CPA framework as a guiding thread. ILSI has been recently criticized at the global level because it claimed to be an independent research institute, while serving the interests of its funders – large food transnationals – rather than public health interests^{13,14,15}. ILSI Brazil is supported by Coca-Cola (A97), Danone (A162), General Mills (A165), and Kellogg's (A180), amongst others.

Coalition management

By the coalition management strategy, actors from the food industry try to build relationships with third parties, such as health organizations, communities, and the media. On some occasions, food industry actors also try to intimidate their opponents. We found evidence of these practices in Brazil, as described below.

Box 2

The case of Brazilian office of the International Life Science Institute (ILSI).

ILSI Brazil has a nutrition task-force on child nutrition, led by infant formula manufacturers (A173). ILSI Brazil also participated in an international conference on child health, where it organized a round table (A172). Two interviewees noted that these relationships between ILSI Brazil and academics, in particular, translated into political influence in the country. Indeed, academics are usually presented as independent experts in the working groups of ANVISA, for example, even for those who have ties with ILSI and may represent the interests of its food industry members (interviews, journalist and member of civil society).

One quote, from a presentation of ILSI in 2018, perhaps best illustrates the reason why food industry actors need to cultivate good relationships with third parties: *"A consistent stakeholder management process can guarantee the 'social license to operate' (...). So it is very important to cultivate good relationships with the most important stakeholders for the organization! (...) The better the relationship, the greater the resilience of the company"* (A168).

Several events of ILSI Brazil were led by a pediatrician, who also coordinated a program funded by Danone, called "O Nutri-Brasil Infância" (Nutri-Brazil Childhood) (A160) and worked with Coca-Cola on a *"paper for the Brazilian Journal of Paediatrics (which was) mailed, physically, to nutritionists and pediatricians all over the country"*, where the role of SSB on obesity was deemed to be anecdotal (interview, member of the government).

Another academic and member of ILSI Brasil (A40, A171) was on the scientific committee of the website "Processed Foods" of ITAL (the São Paulo Public Institute of Food Technology), who questions a novel classification of foods, based on their degree of processing, and in which ultra-processed food products are considered unhealthy³⁰. Other members of the ITAL committee included representatives of ABIA and the International Food Information Council (IFIC), itself supported by food industry actors (A40, A91, A171).

We also noted the interactions between SBAN and the food industry. Coca-Cola (A95), Nestlé (A242), and Unilever (A296) were all associate members of SBAN at the period of data collection. In 2016, representatives from ILSI Brazil, ITAL, ABIA and SBAN were present at the launch of BRAFIC, the Brazilian Food Information Council branch of IFIC³¹.

ABIA: Brazilian Association of Food Industries; BRAFIC: Brazilian Information Council.

- **Interactions with third parties**

We found examples of the involvement of food industry actors in different health (and other) initiatives across the country (Box 3).

Box 3

Examples of initiatives and institutions supported by food industry actors in Brazil (non-exhaustive).

NAME OF THE INDUSTRY ACTOR	INITIATIVE	THIRD PARTY INVOLVED IN THE ACTION, IF APPLICABLE	REFERENCE FROM SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL S1 OR INTERVIEWEE
Coca-Cola	Riverside communities receive sustainable lighting in Amazonas	Led by the organization Litro de Luz and Asproc (Association of Rural Producers of Carauari), with funding from the Território Médio Juruá Program, a partnership between Usaid (United States Agency for International Development), Sitawi Finanças do Bem, partner of the Social Entrepreneur Award, Coca-Cola, Natura and members of the Juruá Middle Territory Forum	(A92)
	Reforestation in Espírito Santo	With the TNC (The Nature Conservancy), through the Coalition Cities for Waters, with the State Government, the Barra Seca and Foz do Rio Doce Basin Committee and operational support from BioAtlântica Institute (IBIO)	(A93)
	<i>"Ten sustainability projects in the South and Southeast regions (...) to continue with activities aimed at the community's socio-educational, cultural and sports development, and initiatives for the environment"</i>		(A94)
	<i>Young Colective – "which aims to inspire and empower young people aged 16 to 25, living in low-income urban communities, through training and professional development, enhancing self-esteem and connecting with new income-generating opportunities"</i>		(A98, A101)
	<i>Colective Movement – a "private social impact platform (...) with the objective of stimulating social innovation and improving the nutritional status of Brazilians"</i>		(A99)
	Brazilian United Nations Global Compact Committee	UNDP (United Nations Development Program)	(A100)
	<i>Popular Plate – "the initiative offers quality lunch for the low-income population"</i>	A partnership between the Government of the State of Pará and the Coca-Cola Brazil System	(A103-4)

(continues)

Box 3 (continued)

NAME OF THE INDUSTRY ACTOR	INITIATIVE	THIRD PARTY INVOLVED IN THE ACTION, IF APPLICABLE	REFERENCE FROM SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL S1 OR INTERVIEWEE
Coca-Cola	<i>"The national project Citizenship Square (...) offers several free services to the community. It also promotes physical and entertainment activities for adults, youth and children. (...) The community has access to several free services, including the issuance of an identity and work card, as well as actions related to health and the environment"</i>	<i>"The event brings together several professionals and representatives of private entities and institutions, partner companies and employees of Coca-Cola Femsa Brasil"</i>	(A105)
	6th Viva Festival – <i>"the activities of the project take place in 11 schools in Sorocaba, ten of which are from the municipal public network and one private school, and they take place through the training of Physical Education teachers who transmit the rules and concepts of this sports modality to children"</i>	Sponsored by Sorocaba Refrescos (Coca-Cola), through the São Paulo Sports Incentive Law	(A106)
	World Day of Rivers and Beaches Cleaning		(A107)
	Free cinema in public spaces	State Government Cultural Incentive Program (PROAC-ICMS), and in partnership with the Sorocaba Department of Culture and Tourism and the culture departments of the cities covered by the project	(A108)
	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A111)
	Supported McHappy Day	McDonald's	(A112)
	Latin American Commitment to a Healthy Future	<i>"A multisectoral partnership with the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation and other companies in the beverage industry"</i>	(A115)
Happiness factory	<i>"There is a professional that is called Victor Matsudo (...). He [created] a project called 'Agita São Paulo'. They established partnerships with the government of São Paulo and also with the Brazilian Minister of Health in the last decade. (...) Victor Matsudo was a part of the Global Energy Balance Network – GEBN. (...) He is a researcher in physical activity. Well, the conclusion was that people are not moving enough. (...) Some of these events are in Coca-Cola factories"</i>	(interview, journalist)	
Danone	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A150)
Grupo Bimbo	Supported the McHappy Day	McDonald's	(A166)
Mars	Supported the McHappy Day	McDonald's	(A182)

(continues)

Box 3 (continued)

NAME OF THE INDUSTRY ACTOR	INITIATIVE	THIRD PARTY INVOLVED IN THE ACTION, IF APPLICABLE	REFERENCE FROM SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL S1 OR INTERVIEWEE
McDonald's	<i>"More than eight thousand solidarity actions, with the direct involvement of more than 12,000 employees. This movement collected 22,000 warm clothes, 15,000 children's books, 200,000 objects and many kilos of non-perishable food"</i>		(A185)
	<i>"18-hour course for doctors in the Family Health Strategy (ESF), 18 hours for other professionals in the ESF units, 10 hours for doctors who are not part of the ESF units and 4 hours for professionals in the state regulation system and municipal"</i>		(A216)
	Ronald McDonald Institute – Gala Dinner	<i>"Bringing together approximately 500 guests annually, including businessmen, executives, artists and other people"</i>	(A187-8)
	Ronald McDonald Institute – McHappy Day	<i>"McHappy Day is already part of the city. (...) The inclusion in the municipal calendar demonstrates the respect and the importance that the event has for the city, it is a symbolic recognition, which should happen in all the cities where the campaign exists" (McDonald's, A205)</i>	(A197)
		<i>"One person is really influential in the [José Alencar Gomes da Silva Brazilian National Cancer Institute – INCA]. She is a pediatrician and (...) she is also on the board of the Ronald McDonald Institute. She is a pediatrician in the pediatrics cancer unit. (...) she uses the INCA to get funds for the Ronald Institute, and then the Ronald Institute uses the funds for her unit [in the INCA]. And you have a plate from the Ronald Institute in the pediatrics section of the INCA"</i>	(interview, member of the government)
	Ronald McDonald Institute – general	<i>"I can say that the Ronald McDonald Institute played a key role in the development of pediatric oncology in Brazil and is today the main funding agency for the development of this specialty in the country"</i>	(medical professional, A200)
		<i>"Working together with INCA, the Brazilian Society of Pediatric Oncology (Sobopec), the National Confederation of Support and Assistance Institutions for Children and Adolescents with Cancer (Coniacc) and with more than 80 partner institutions throughout Brazil"</i>	(A195, A202)

(continues)

Box 3 (continued)

NAME OF THE INDUSTRY ACTOR	INITIATIVE	THIRD PARTY INVOLVED IN THE ACTION, IF APPLICABLE	REFERENCE FROM SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL S1 OR INTERVIEWEE
Mondeléz Brasil	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A224, A226)
	Sports & Arts Caravans with more than 20,000 students and the training of 800 teachers		(A228)
Nestlé	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A228)
	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A239)
	Campaign "Breast Cancer in Fashion Target" and Race and Walk Against Breast Cancer	Brazilian Institute of Cancer Control (IBCC)	(A241)
	"[In] São Paulo we had Nestlé with a food and nutrition education [programme]"		(interview, academic)
PepsiCo	The Transforming Communities program – "actions aimed at education, sport and/or social development"		(A275, A278)
	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A276)
	Support to several organizations, including: FGV (Getúlio Vargas Foundation); Eprocad Foundation (Educational Sports Foundation Pro Children and Adolescents); GRAACC (Support Group for Adolescents and Children with Cancer); Make a Wish; Mesa Brasil; TNC (The Nature Conservancy); Nursery Hoasis (Sete Lagoas – Minas Gerais State); Nursery Mãezinha (Itu – São Paulo State); Municipal School Antonieta Gambardella (Itaporanga d'Ajuda – Sergipe State); Municipal School Erika Plewka (Curitiba – Paraná State); Municipal School Vaversa (São Mateus – Espírito Santo State)		(A277)

(continues)

In Brazil, food industry actors supported artistic events, nutrition education, physical activity initiatives, and the prevention of cancer in children. We found many details of the activities of the Ronald McDonald Institute. A medical doctor, for instance, stated that the Institute "played a key role in the development of pediatric oncology in Brazil and is today the main funding agency for the development of this specialty in the country" (A200). The institute organized several events, on an annual basis, such as a gala with key opinion leaders, and the McHappy Day (*McDia Feliz*), in which the funds generated by the sales of burgers were raised for community initiatives, in partnership with the José Alencar Gomes da Silva Brazilian National Cancer Institute (INCA). Food manufacturers also donated some of their products. One participant described an instance where food that was not considered good enough

Box 3 (continued)

NAME OF THE INDUSTRY ACTOR	INITIATIVE	THIRD PARTY INVOLVED IN THE ACTION, IF APPLICABLE	REFERENCE FROM SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL S1 OR INTERVIEWEE
Unilever	Donations of products	Mesa Brasil SESC, national food bank network	(A290)
	Supported the McHappy Day	McDonald's	(A291)
	Support to several programs, including: <i>"We support the construction of facilities for the NGO Educap (Democratic Space of Union, Coexistence, Learning and Prevention)";</i> <i>"AlfaSol Programs"</i> <i>"Solidary Literacy Association";</i> <i>"We support Unicef sanitation programs";</i> <i>"Risadaria – the initiative, of which the Kibon brand is a supporter, is a marathon of humor";</i> <i>"We are part of the Corporate Club as a WWF Brasil partner company"</i>		(A292-4)
Multiple companies	Education programs in schools	<i>"[In] some municipalities, Nestlé, Danone and others, they are together with the Mayors, deciding, offering nutrition education, activities for the schools"</i> (interview, academic)	(interviews)
	New Urbans – <i>"this is the objective: to make public policy with private resources (...) a Nestlé factory [and] one of the McDonald's chain units has already been visited, which has already changed the concept a little"</i> (interview, member of the government)	<i>"In the past three years it got funding from Coca-Cola"</i> (interview, member of the government)	(interviews)

(but safe) for consumption was sold to municipalities in Brazil, to be used to feed *"those who don't have anything to eat"*, because *"it costs more to dispose of them correctly than to give them away"* (interview, former staff from the food industry).

Besides these interactions with communities and health organizations, a participant noted that the media is connected to the food industry by the revenues generated with the advertisement of food products in newspapers, for example (interview, member of the government). In addition, a former employee from the food industry explained that the marketing departments of food companies (and other industries) sometimes invite journalists to their headquarters to discuss their personal experience, to build relationships with these third parties: *"these are journalists who work for the main media companies in Brazil, so you create these channels of dialogue that you use later, for sure"* (interview, former staff from the food industry). Our interviewees noted that it could be difficult for public health professionals to get information about the healthiness of food products published in national newspapers, perhaps because of these relations between the industry and the media (interview, member of the government).

- **Fragmentation and destabilization of the opposition**

We found instances where food industry actors discredited public health professionals, as they were seen as opponents to the food industry and/or its products. Two of our interviewees, working in public health, told us that these threats and intimidations were successful at silencing them.

“I remember the threats [to a high ranking official], and they always make [that person understand that] they could get her fired from the Brazilian Ministry of Health” (interview, member of the government).

Information management

The food industry in Brazil also influenced the science and information disseminated about nutrition. In particular, food industry actors amplified information that was beneficial to their products, or that was giving a better image to their companies. Several food industry actors took part in scientific events across the country. The Nestlé Nutrition Institute sponsored pediatric congresses in Brazil (A266-7). McDonald’s, through its institute and in partnership with the Brazilian Ministry of Health, organized a forum on public policies for pediatric oncology (A217). The fast-food restaurant also sponsored, participated, and presented information in other scientific events on that topic, in Brazil and abroad (A217). Mondelez and Nestlé were part of the XXII Brazilian Congress of Nutrition (A236, A268).

Moreover, food industry actors developed education initiatives in Brazil, particularly those targeting children in schools. Nestlé has two nutrition and physical activity programs (A254, A256, A262-4), including one that has been running for more than twenty years in the country (A262). Unilever has another nutrition program, in partnership with Latinmed, a marketing and communication company, and the Heart Institute (A303). Our interviewees also mentioned these programs in schools, in *“...partnership with the Secretariat of Education. (...) However, the problem is that they had the [logo of the company] in many places (...). And they had a program of rewards for the teachers”* (interview, member of civil society).

Influence on public health policy and use of legal actions

The main objective of any CPA strategy is, ultimately, to secure a favorable policy environment for food companies. In Brazil, food industry actors were indeed directly influencing public health policy. Coca-Cola identified the possible regulation of its products as one of the main risks to its business: *“Taxes and changes in regulations in the regions where we operate could affect our business”* (A123), since they *“can reduce the demand for our products, which could negatively affect our profitability”* (A146).

- **Indirect access**

A well-known technique of influence on public policy is lobbying, which occurs frequently in Brazil. It was described by one interviewee as *“a daily, day-to-day, performance (...) on technical people, politicians (...) with a unique and exclusive interest in financial profit (...). They also put pressure on the executive branch”* (interview, member of the government).

Personal relations between members of the government and representatives of the industry, often from the same social class and from the capital city Brasília, could be a factor that facilitates lobbying in Brazil:

“In Brasília, [lobbying] is so common (...). People know each other since they were young, so the public and private relations are mixed up. (...) Because much of the people that are involved in these debates, these government relations area, or even in the government, they were born in Brasília (...) and they were friends since they were kids” (former staff from the food industry).

It seems that a small group of industry actors, composed of ABIA, ABIR, and Brazilian National Confederation of Industry (CNI), as well as large transnationals such as Nestlé and Coca-Cola, amongst others, is involved in lobbying in Brazil (interviews, member of civil society and member of the government). In 2018, ABIR organized a seminar in Brasília on sugar-sweetened beverages, an event attended by representatives from the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture, ANVISA, and São

Paulo Public Institute of Food Technology (ITAL) (A61). In addition, that same year, the Ministry of Health met with representatives of different companies and trade associations, including ABIA, ABIR, and Coca-Cola, on at least four occasions (A6-8, A52-4). That same year, ABIA and Coca-Cola, in separate and joint meetings, met with the Government Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (A12, A122) and with the director of ANVISA (A11-2, A116, A118). Towards the end of the year, ILSI also visited the director of ANVISA to present the activities of the institute and discuss a “*report of the technical and operational cooperation agreement with ANVISA*” (A169).

Furthermore, the philanthropic activities of corporations in Brazil were directly used to interact with government officials. Two representatives from the Ronald McDonald Institute, for example, visited the Vice-Secretary of Health “*in order to align the Institute’s strategies with the national cancer prevention and control policy*” (A206).

Another form of indirect influence on policy is the co-option of policy makers, in which members of the government represent the interests of the industry. This was the case, for instance, during the development of the Bill on the restrictions of marketing to children, where “*one of the rapporteur (...) was an owner of a Coca-Cola distributor in Brasília*” (interview, civil society). In 2018, the government proposed to reduce the tax credits to producers of sugar-sweetened beverages in the economic free-zone of the Manaus region, in the Amazon State. In this case, members of the government had personal ties with the industry, and they defended its position, which was to avoid any cut in the tax credits. In particular, a Senator and owner of a sugar-sweetened beverages distribution company used his position to influence the decisions of the government. They coordinated a meeting between the “*Minister of Economy and the president of Coca-Cola Latin America*” in 2008, when “*the government was discussing a change on the tax model*”, and then, in 2018, by working “*to revoke the decree [on the reduction of tax credits]. The Senators that presented the project to revoke the decree were all from the Amazon (...). All of them have financial ties with Coca-Cola and Pepsi. All of them*” (interview, journalist).

- **Incentives**

We also found evidence of the provision of incentives by food industry actors to policy makers. While corruption was beyond the scope of our study, the infamous 2014 *Lava Jato Operation* (Operation Car Wash) in Brazil, in which members of the government were found to be involved in cases of corruption, was mentioned by our interviewees as a critical event in the political history of Brazil¹⁶. One interviewee explained that some food industry actors were involved in these cases and that some companies “*have a fund to defend former executives that eventually could have problems with the justice because they sent unofficial incentives to [third parties]*” (interview, former staff from the food industry).

The Car Wash episode led to some reforms in Brazil, such as restrictions to political donations (interview, member of civil society). However, food industry actors sometimes offer incentives of a smaller value to policy makers, such as travels abroad, wine, and smartphones (interviews, members of the government and former policy makers). Nevertheless, there are existing restrictions in place for government officials to receive gifts from companies (interview, member of the government). Our interviewees explained that lobbying often takes place outside the Congress, through events paid by the industry, such as dinners in restaurants or private cocktails (interview, member of the government). One interviewee described an event organized by the Chamber of Commerce, with the participation of the director of ANVISA, and noted that such events could interfere with the democratic process, when discussions are not recorded and not made transparent, contrary to what happens in formal meetings of ANVISA (interview, former staff from the food industry).

- **Actors in government decision-making**

Food industry actors were directly involved in government decision-making in Brazil. They advocated for co-regulation (through, for example, public-private partnerships) and self-regulation. In Brazil, several food companies had voluntary agreements to restrict their marketing to children (A142, A157, A165, A185, A208, A244, A252, A298). Food industry actors also promoted their voluntary efforts in reformulating food products (A30, A142, A247, A252, A281-2, A299-301). Since 2008, ABIA has a partnership with the Brazilian Ministry of Health to reduce trans fats in food products (A37). The

industry claimed the reductions of trans fats were successful, thus the Ministry signed another partnership to reduce sodium (interview, member of the government). During data collection, in 2018, a new agreement to reduce added sugar was signed. During the development of the agreement, over a period of eighteen months, food industry actors met with the Brazilian Ministry of Health on six occasions (A36). The launch of the agreement was promoted online by both the food industry (A36) and the Brazilian Ministry of Health (A16, A34, A64, A84-5). Some of our participants were critical of these agreements, because they could serve as a “*damage control agenda*” rather than really improving the food environment (interview, member of the government). In addition, one interviewee suggested that the Brazilian Ministry of Health, in the case of reformulation, depends on the good will of the industry and “*will never tell that it is not working, because they are part of that (...) – because it would just be saying that the Brazilian Ministry of Health failed if it doesn’t work*” (interview, member of the government). Self-regulation was explicitly cited by the food industry as an argument against mandatory legislation, for example, in the case of taxation of unhealthy foods or restrictions of marketing to children (interview, civil society).

“We formed an unprecedented partnership between the food and beverage industry and the Brazilian Ministry of Health to reduce sugar in products by 2022. We invested in sport, in innovation, in responsible marketing to children guidelines. Tax does not create health” (ABIR, A63).

- **Legal actions**

Another strategy of the food industry in Brazil was the use of legal actions to challenge public health policies, termed “*judicial activism*” (interview, member of the government). This was used, for example, to prevent the introduction of a policy on marketing to children (interviews, member of the government and academia).

“The food industry used a legal action to prevent the government from introducing the legislation. Yes, the legislation was formulated, was published, but not implemented, because they went to the Justice and they got the legislation suspended” (interview, academic).

Food industry actors also used the threat of legal action as a means to silence their public health opponents in Brazil (interview, member of civil society), a practice directly related to the opposition fragmentation and destabilization strategy described earlier.

“Anything that you do that can criticize [their brand], they [threat to sue you] (...). And if you do not stop [your criticism], they will sue you, and litigations are costly in Brazil, and they tend to take some time to proceed. So, usually, [critics] prefer to stop criticizing” (interview, former member from the food industry).

Discursive strategies

- **Impacts on the economy and society**

In Brazil, food industry actors used economic arguments to present themselves as important stakeholders in the country. ABIA claimed that the food industry generates 10% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and 1.6 million jobs (A22-3). ABIR explained that its members paid BRL 10 million per year in taxes in Brazil (A70-1). ABIR used similar arguments to show its important contribution to the economic-free zone of the Amazon (A68) and claimed that the economic-free zone “*has become largely responsible for protecting the Amazon Forest*” (A68). Our interviewees noted that these economic arguments are often used by the food industry:

“They are always highlighting this issue. All the PowerPoint presentations they make here in the National Congress are saying ‘our sector generates so many jobs (...), the economy lives around that, if there is a change in the legislation, the city will turn into a ghost town and such’” (interview, member of the government).

Food industry actors claimed that public health policies would lead to losses of profits and jobs in the industry, and to direct negative impacts on the economy of the country. This was the case made against a proposal to reduce the tax credits to producers of sugar-sweetened beverages in the economic-free zone of the Amazon, which would “*deeply impact the sector*” of beverages (ABIR, A66) and “*impact the economic development of the Amazon region (...) and directly affect populations that depend on the production of native inputs, such as guaraná and açaí. It also affects the fight against deforestation and*

regional tourism" (ABIR, A68). These arguments were also used in discussions regarding the restrictions of marketing to children (interview, civil society).

- **Framing the debate**

Food industry actors in Brazil presented themselves as part of the solution in the prevention and control of obesity (ABIR, A75). Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and Unilever, among others, were part of the Brazilian branch of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and used the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG), including SDG 17, which focuses on partnership, to justify their interactions with third parties (A131, A246).

In their discourse regarding nutrition, food industry actors in Brazil mostly focused on obesity, while the question of a healthy and adequate diet was virtually ignored. Instead, the industry focused on personal and parental responsibility, the need for more physical activity, and the importance of moderation, education, and balanced diets (A79, A115, A145). Here again, these arguments were used when trying to influence public policy in the country.

"You see the same arguments in public hearings, in their presentations, in documents that they leave for the assessors and assistants of Deputies and Senators. And at the end they always suggest solutions such as education, balanced diet, self-regulation. It is incredible. (...) I didn't realize that they would use the same expressions [in other countries]" (interview, civil society).

As discussed earlier, we found evidence that the food industry preferred way of delivering these solutions was co-regulation and self-regulation rather than mandatory policies.

Discussion

Food industry actors in Brazil used a diverse range of CPA strategies, which, individually and collectively, have the potential to negatively influence public policy, but also research and practice, in the country. They built relationships with communities, health organizations, and the media, and tried to shape the evidence base in nutrition by their participation in scientific events, or interactions with professionals in nutrition. This was discussed by Canella et al.¹⁷ in an article published in 2015. Pereira et al.¹⁸ also reported the influence of the food industry in the training of nutrition professionals. Some of our participants noted the promotion of specific brands of parental products during training events, where these interactions with communities and professionals could become marketing opportunities^{7,19}. These interactions with third parties and efforts to influence science risk compromising the integrity and credibility of public institutions and health professionals, by their association with food manufacturers, particularly those producing ultra-processed products²⁰. These interactions also risk promoting the agenda of the industry, while compromising the public health agenda²¹. There is a need for more scrutiny of these initiatives, particularly when they are targeted at children and other vulnerable populations.

Moreover, food industry actors had indirect access to policy makers and were providing financial incentives to government officials. The industry, when faced with potential regulation of its products and activities, advocated for co- and self-regulation rather than mandatory policies. The many shortcomings of co- and self-regulation, in the case of the food industry, particularly their ineffectiveness in improving population health, have been discussed elsewhere^{22,23,24}. Besides their efforts in trying to influence policy, food industry actors threatened to silence public health professionals who advocated for restrictions on the sale of unhealthy products, or who were vocal against the practices of corporations.

Finally, food industry actors used discursive strategies, focusing on their economic importance in the country and on the positive role they can play in society. These arguments could serve to shift the blame away from the role of unhealthy products in the NCDs epidemic, while securing a seat for the food industry at the policy table^{25,26}.

Our results are similar to existing evidence of the CPA of the food industry in other countries, where all CPA practices have also been observed^{12,27,28}. For example, in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Uruguay, food industry actors lobbied government officials¹². In Ecuador, Nestlé also has

education programs for schools¹². In France, the Ronald McDonald Foundation built relationships with health professionals and was regarded as a credible health partner by medical doctors²⁷. This could be explained by the fact that several of the actors included in our study are transnationals, or pertain to international organizations, such as ILSI and International Food Information Council (IFIC). There are three notable differences in Brazil compared to other countries where the CPA of the food industry has been analyzed to date. First, the personal relationships between policy makers and industry representatives – since they belong to the same social class and many of them are from Brasília – may explain the political influence exerted in the Congress and on the executive branch of the government. Second, food industry actors explicitly cited the SDG, particularly SDG 17, as an argument for collaborations with other stakeholders in nutrition. Thus, international standards have a direct impact in shaping the discourse of the industry at the national level. Third, in Brazil, this discourse, where the industry presents itself as part of the solution, is in direct contradiction with its threats to public health advocates and its attempts to influence public health policy in the country.

Our study has limitations. First, this was not an exhaustive mapping of all industry political practices. Future studies could focus on other periods in time and other actors, including those influencing policies at the State level. Our interviewees noted that the question of an adequate and healthy diet in Brazil is very much aligned with the question of land, indigenous communities, and families, and they discussed the political practices of the agribusiness industry, particularly large farmers and the pesticide industry. These sectors were beyond the scope of our project, as were the factors that contributed to the use of one or another CPA practice, and the effectiveness of these practices in influencing public policy.

In Brazil, there is an existing coalition of individuals in the government, civil society, and academia², pioneers for their efforts in protecting and promoting adequate and healthy diets of Brazil and addressing undue influence from corporations. Academics from Brazil started denouncing the negative influence that corporations in the food industry have on low- and middle-income countries a decade ago²⁷. However, our interviewees noted that these efforts have been under threats in recent years. They felt that, more than ever, these public spaces need to be protected (interview, academic). This study contributes to that objective, by providing knowledge of the political practices of the food industry. These practices interfere with the implementation of the Brazilian National Food and Nutrition Policy (PNAN)²⁹, particularly the efforts to: promote adequate and healthy diets, build a workforce of independent nutrition professionals, regulate unhealthy food products, and conduct independent food and nutrition research. Identifying and monitoring the political practices of corporations is a crucial step to protect public health policy, but, ultimately, mechanisms should be put in place to address and manage these practices. In Brazil, some of these mechanisms already exist, with the publication of the agenda of policy makers and limitations on political donations, as explained in this article. Moreover, more efforts are needed to prevent undue influence from the food industry during the development stage of public health policies.

Conclusion

In Brazil, food industry actors used a broad range of instrumental strategies, such as interactions with third parties, the dissemination of information on nutrition and physical activity, and lobbying high ranking officials. They also intimidated public health professionals, including threats of litigation, which had the effect of silencing them. All of these instrumental practices were supported and facilitated by the use of arguments, such as the crucial role that the food industry plays in the economy, and its support to the UN SDG. Personal responsibility, moderation, and education were cited as solutions to the obesity epidemic, and there was little discussion on the broader issue of inadequate and unhealthy diets. It is crucial that public health professionals, policy makers, and the public learn about these practices and, in response, develop and implement robust mechanisms to address undue influence from corporations.

Contributors

M. Mialon led the study design, data collection, analysis and writing of the manuscript and approved the final manuscript. G. Cediel contributed to the data analysis and to the writing of the manuscript, read and approved the final manuscript. P. C. Jaime and F. B. Scagliusi contributed to the study design and to the writing of the manuscript, read and approved the final manuscript.

Additional informations

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Acknowledgments

The authors thank their interviewees for their involvement in this study. They also acknowledge Dr. Marita Hennessy for having proofread a revised version of this manuscript and São Paulo State Research Foundation (FAPESP; grant number 2017/24744-0) for the financial support.

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Resumo

No passado, os agentes da indústria alimentícia tentaram atrasar e enfraquecer os esforços de saúde pública para promoção de dietas adequadas e saudáveis no Brasil. O presente estudo tem como objetivo identificar as estratégias políticas utilizadas pelos agentes da indústria alimentícia no Brasil. Realizamos uma análise documental das informações disponíveis ao público, bem como entrevistas com 18 informantes-chave em saúde pública e nutrição. A coleta e análise de dados foi realizada entre outubro de 2018 e janeiro de 2019. No Brasil, os agentes da indústria alimentícia interagiram com organizações de saúde, comunidades e com a mídia. Difundiram informações sobre nutrição e atividade física em eventos científicos e escolas. A indústria alimentícia também apresentava aliados dentro do governo e fazia lobby junto a altos funcionários. Por fim, os agentes da indústria alimentícia intimidaram alguns profissionais da saúde pública, inclusive com ameaças de litígio, o que teve o efeito de silenciá-los. Essas estratégias foram facilitadas por argumentos como o papel crucial desempenhado pela indústria de alimentos na economia e seu apoio aos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável da Organização das Nações Unidas. Responsabilidade pessoal, moderação e educação foram citadas como soluções para a epidemia de obesidade, e houve pouca discussão sobre a problemática mais ampla de dietas inadequadas e insalubres. Os agentes da indústria alimentícia no Brasil utilizaram uma gama diversificada de estratégias políticas com o potencial de influenciar negativamente as políticas públicas, mas também a pesquisa e a prática no país. Conhecer essas estratégias é um primeiro passo essencial e, em resposta, é crucial desenvolver mecanismos robustos para lidar com a influência indevida das corporações.

Indústria Alimentícia; Política Pública; Ética Profissional

Resumen

En el pasado, agentes de la industria alimentaria intentaron retrasar y debilitar los esfuerzos de la salud pública para promover dietas adecuadas y saludables en Brasil. El objetivo de este estudio fue identificar las estrategias políticas usadas por los agentes de la industria alimentaria en Brasil. Realizamos un análisis documental de la información disponible públicamente y entrevistas con 18 informantes clave en nutrición dentro de la salud pública. La recolección de datos y análisis se llevaron a cabo entre octubre de 2018 y enero de 2019. En Brasil, los agentes de la industria alimentaria interactuaron con organizaciones de salud, comunidades y medios. Ellos diseminaron información sobre nutrición y actividad física mediante eventos científicos y en las escuelas. La industria alimentaria tenía también aliados dentro del gobierno y funcionarios de alto rango que hacía lobby a su favor. Finalmente, los agentes de esta industria intimidaron a algunos profesionales públicos de salud, incluso con amenazas de litigios, que tuvieron el efecto de silenciarlos. Estas estrategias se facilitaron mediante el uso de argumentos tales como el papel crucial que desempeñaba la industria alimentaria en la economía y en su apoyo para los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas. Se citaron la responsabilidad personal, moderación, y educación como soluciones para la epidemia de obesidad, y hubo una pequeña discusión sobre un tema tan amplio como el de las dietas inadecuadas e insanas. Los agentes de la industria alimentaria en Brasil usaron un repertorio diverso de estrategias políticas, que tienen el potencial de influenciar negativamente políticas públicas, investigaciones, así como prácticas en el país. Como primer paso es esencial aprender de estas estrategias, y en respuesta, es crucial desarrollar mecanismos robustos para abordar la influencia indevida de las corporaciones alimentarias.

Industria de Alimentos; Política Pública; Ética Profesional

Submitted on 27/Apr/2020

Final version resubmitted on 13/Jul/2020

Approved on 04/Sep/2020