Can Coca Cola promote physical activity?

Thiago Hérick de Sá

In their Lancet Manifesto (March 8, p 847) Richard Horton and colleagues state: “Our tolerance of neoliberalism and transnational forces dedicated to ends far removed from the needs of the vast majority of people, and especially the most deprived and vulnerable, is only deepening the crisis we face.” I agree, and so do many colleagues in Brazil.

The Fifth International Congress on Physical Activity and Public Health, held in Rio de Janeiro, April 8–11, 2014, was sponsored by Coca Cola. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that a major conference on physical activity held in Brazil has been sponsored by an organisation whose policies, practices, or products conflict with those of public health. The sponsorship was not only financial; Coca Cola was everywhere—at side meetings, in the sponsors’ hall, giving away its products and propaganda.

At a time when sweetened soft drinks are recognised by independent organisations as a major cause of the present uncontrolled obesity pandemic, which notably affects children and developing countries, such as China, India—and Brazil, this is worrying.

Big Food corporations are spending billions of US$ on their strategy to claim that obesity is caused by physical inactivity. Their engagement with physical activity and public health organisations and professionals is part of their corporate social responsibility strategy. Their campaigns include techniques to evade regulation and to influence science, using methods similar to those used by tobacco corporations in the past.

Is this a kind of retribution to Latin America—where laws to protect children against ultra-processed food were implemented in Mexico, Chile, and Costa Rica, and where civil society organisations oppose Big Food corporations to limit advertising of ultra-processed products to children in Brazil?

Brazil is hosting the World Cup this month, and the Olympics in 2016. Both events are committed to sponsorships from McDonald’s and Coca Cola, among others. Again, it is easy to understand why they would sponsor such events. This outrageous practice is pushed by international sports federations, putting pressure on national governments.
We cannot accept big transnational fast food and soft drinks corporations to support sports and physical activity.

I declare no competing interests. I acknowledge funding from São Paulo Research Foundation.

References


a University of São Paulo, School of Public Health, Nutrition, São Paulo, SP 01246-904, Brazil