

*This letter was published in full in two of Mexico's most important newspapers (El Reforma and El Universal, with joint coverage of approximately 800,000+ people) on 6th May 2013.*

**CALL FOR A MEXICAN CRUSADE ON HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION**  
TO PRESIDENT ENRIQUE PEÑA NIETO  
TO THE LEGISLATORS OF MEXICO AND TO THE PEOPLE OF MEXICO

As international organizations, representing hundreds of organizations with thousands of members, dedicated to the protection of consumers and public health, to optimal infant and child feeding, and to combating malnutrition in all its forms, we want to express our profound concern about the level of ill health that is affecting the Mexican population.

Obesity is an underlying factor in the scourge of many chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, strokes and several cancers, and is largely driven by the marketing of unhealthy fat, sugar, salt enriched foods which are often "ultra-processed." Mexican obesity rates are exceptionally high, approaching those of the USA. Your Ministry of Health has shown that Mexicans are 2-5 times more likely to have the diabetes and high blood pressure complications of weight gain than US citizens.

The susceptibility of the Mexican population to these diseases seems to relate to long-standing childhood malnutrition. Indeed Mexicans become more vulnerable as their diet deteriorates and the consumption of unhealthy manufactured and pre-prepared foods and sugar-rich drinks increases - steadily replacing traditional healthier dietary patterns.

As in other countries worldwide, these changes in dietary patterns are largely due to the absence of preventive measures that control the marketing of these less healthy foods and the obesogenic environment. It is now predicted that the costs of treating these diseases will soon overwhelm your health services and already particularly affects the poor. If Mexico is to combat maternal and childhood malnutrition and obesity, it needs to take even more radical preventive steps than those adopted by the West.

Based on scientific evidence and global recommendations, we recommend that the government, legislators and people of Mexico urgently enact policies and regulations to curb the path of obesity and to effectively address the situation faced by hungry, malnourished and, in some cases, improperly overfed children, youth and adults.

**We recommend:**

- The prohibition of all marketing and other commercial promotion of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents;
- Supporting and protecting breastfeeding and optimal complementary feeding through the regulation of baby food marketing and other measures (namely the implementation of the International Code for Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant World Health Assembly resolutions);
- Clear and comprehensible labeling of food and beverages that warns of risks, truly informs consumers and encourages healthy choices;
- Mandatory free drinking water inside schools and public spaces such as hospitals, government buildings and all other public places;
- The provision of only healthy foods and beverages inside schools, with similar requirements for all government-supported institutions. This will also favour local farmers and favorably change the food economy.
- Promotion of local and national food production systems and programs to ensure universal access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables;
- Evidence-based educational campaigns on healthy diet and exercise and the prohibition of sponsorship of education materials by manufacturers of unhealthy foods and beverages.

We are pleased that President Peña Nieto and Secretary Robles have announced the Mexican government's Crusade on Hunger. However, we fear that the close participation of the industries that are driving the chronic disease pandemic globally and in Mexico – the very ones who need to be regulated – threatens the Mexican government's sovereign right and obligation to do whatever is necessary to guarantee the Mexican people's Constitutional Rights to food and health.

It is clear that the top strategic priority of these corporations is to change traditional food patterns in countries such as Mexico – a country described by UNESCO as having an *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*, with one of the richest varieties of traditional foods and cultures – and to increase consumption of refined “ultra-processed foods” flavored mainly by fats, sugars, salt and artificial additives.

We appeal to you to protect the Mexican people, especially children, youth and the poor, and to preserve Mexico's unique knowledge of food, its traditional culinary culture and skills, and its endemic plant species that are so valued internationally.

We urge you to heed the many World Health Assembly Resolutions and recommendations that seek to ensure that the health policy setting is protected from conflicts of interest, especially in relation to the food and beverage industry. We urge you to adopt the proposals of the National Academy of Medicine in Mexico, other academic institutions, and the Nutritional Health Alliance to ground public health policy in scientific evidence, international recommendations and local practices and to shield it from conflicts of interest.

Since the Brazilian Zero Hunger strategy is said to have served as an inspiration for Mexico's Crusade on Hunger, it is important to understand two key factors for the success of Zero Hunger: 1) several public policies were in place to protect and strengthen national and local food systems, and 2) pressure from organized civil society influenced the government not to engage with the conflicted food industry in policy design and implementation. As a consequence, only civil society, academia and government representatives took part in its policy formation. Although, following industry lobbying, some conflicted industries are involved, but to a limited extent. For example, the national school feeding program is 100% publicly funded, and laws encourage at least 30% of the food to be purchased from local producers with at least 70% unprocessed products.

We hope that the Brazilian experience leads you to integrate a preventive policy in Mexico's National Development Plan that effectively preserves Mexico's unique traditional food culture, promotes local sustainable development and combats the obesogenic environment that is fuelling the chronic disease epidemic.

As organizations with many years of experience in this field, we are pleased to offer any support that we can to help the government rethink this important campaign so that Mexican people can feed their young children optimally and have ready access to nutritious food that will improve their health.

*This letter is endorsed by the following 11 international organisations: Consumers International (CI), International Association for the Study of Obesity (IASO), International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), the International Code Documentation Centre (ICDC), International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), 31 national members of the International Federation of Medical Students Associations (IFMSA), LLL International, Lactation Consultants International Association (ILCA), World Action on Salt and Health (WASH), World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA), International Obesity Forum (IOF).*