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Specialist warns of health risks - Criticism of the inclusion of private companies in the Crusade - Industrialized foods increase obesity and diabetes  
By Adriana Alatorre

The inclusion of private companies in the National Crusade Against Hunger, which aims to reach 7.4 million Mexicans who suffer extreme poverty and lack of food, is a mistake of the Mexican government, said the director of Baby Milk Action, Patti Rundall.

"Mexico already has a huge problem of obesity which is draining household budgets and the health system. Therefore, involving the firms that caused the problem in the Campaign Against Hunger could easily worsen this situation," warned one of the leaders of the International Coalition Against Conflict of Interest. Baby formulas and foods contain a lot of sugar and there is little quality control of these products. For her work she has received several awards, including the Order of the British Empire, the Caroline Walker Trust Award and Giraffe Appreciation Society.

In an interview with Reforma, the specialist said there is a real risk that the Crusade will allow large business corporations to monopolize the food industry, which can lead to higher levels of malnutrition among Mexicans.

Under the pretext of alleviating hunger in the poorest populations in the country, she said, highly processed industrialized foods, high in saturated fats and sugars, as well as low in nutritional value will be promoted. Far from alleviating the problem this will represent a higher risk of malnutrition and diseases like obesity, diabetes, hypertension and stroke.

Last Monday it was announced that PepsiCo will contribute to the National Crusade Against Hunger with the development of a product to improve the nutrition of children and pregnant and nursing women, while Nestlé will run courses for women on the business of selling desserts. "The business of hunger is dominated by corporations and can be used as a way to expand their markets," said Rundall, the British activist since the 80s who advocates healthy eating. She said that these corporations are dangerous because, by projecting a philanthropic image, they are seeking to change the traditional eating patterns.

Currently, the specialist explained, most people in the developing world are eating fresh, healthy and tasty food, but large corporations are interested in capturing this market segment to make people eat ultra-processed foods. She recalled that most of the risk factors for chronic degenerative diseases are due to poor diets based on processed foods and soft drinks, made with lots of preservatives to prolong the shelf life, unlike healthy food.

"It's terrible that companies are taking advantage of this crusade to prevent hunger, and as part of their marketing strategy to penetrate the Mexican market, are pretending to be philanthropic and caring for the poor," she complained.

According Rundall, part of the crusade should be to make companies reduce levels of sugar and salt, and promote small producers who are bringing good products, cheaper and better quality. "Mexico’s obesity rates are terrible and Nestlé’s involvement is terribly negative. They are offering a poisoned chalice," she said.

Inside the National Crusade Against Hunger, the Ministry of Social Development has signed an agreement with Nestlé, to run business courses for women to sell desserts made with their products. The project called "My sweet business" means that 15,000 women will give courses in nutrition, another full day cooking of classes to prepare desserts, and a half-day training on business management to set up their business.

"They may become micro-entrepreneurs to sell desserts. We will give you all the logistics, materials and knowledge to do it," said President of Nestlé Mexico, Marcelo Melchior.

After signing the agreement, Melchior and Secretary Rosario Rosario posed for photos with chocolate truffles.

"I need to get some recursillos(?) and start my own business," joked Robles.

Robles applauded the initiative and said that there is nothing better for mothers to know how to care for their children’s nutrition, and that this transcends welfarism. "We are working in one of the most important aspects of the National Crusade Against Hunger, which is its production side, which is the productive inclusion, which is to generate income, not only through government cash transfers to women, but through the work of these women," she said.

"These women are going to create the possibility of their own income that will help them and their families," she said.

Robles argued that these public-private partnerships strengthen the Crusade’s objectives to benefit the people, and said that as more agreements are signed, many institutions looking to
also join. In the morning, Sedesol signed a framework agreement with the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) to implement a Comprehensive Community Care model. Robles said that the youth of this school will do social service in municipalities of Mexico State and the delegations of Mexico City, UNAM and support the dissemination of the Secretariat activities in the month of the Crusade.