

Importance of Adequate Policies for the Implementation of Sustainable Food Systems: The case of Mexico

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ABSTRACT *Food systems in Mexico have been transformed over the last decades, ushering in a period characterized by a double burden of over and under nutrition, high prevalence of non-communicable diseases, economic deprivation and income inequality, and the destruction of livelihoods, the environment and human rights. This article puts forth recommendations, based on the case of Mexico, for reforming food systems, and indicates that civil society organizations and social movements have a crucial role to play in developing and implementing these changes and serving to counterbalance the influence of commercial interests.*

KEYWORDS *conflict of interest; healthy diets; sustainable agriculture; food sovereignty; biodiversity; human rights; nutrition*

Introduction

Food systems that are based on sovereignty, sustainability and human rights are an *endangered species* in this century of modernity, rush, inequality and invasive marketing. These systems have been transformed to a point where they have been severely damaged; social solidarity and active citizenship are therefore needed to transform practices that favour a few and negatively affect millions of people.

Throughout the history of humankind, the development of different mechanisms to produce food has been constantly advancing. Feeding is an 'inevitable' day-to-day issue and human societies had to ensure the availability of nutrients by establishing different modalities for the collection, production and preparation of food.

Ancestrally, food production was based on soil, climate, regional conditions, knowledge and efforts of the agriculturists and the necessities of the population. At present times, many more factors influence agriculture, many of which do not necessarily respond to the demands of the population but rather obey the interests of big food corporations, even if this reality puts biodiversity at risk and inflicts great losses to small farmers and food producers and their families.

By analysing the case of Mexico, the present article explores the importance of local food systems and the role they play on health and society. Strategies to implement and improve food systems need to be based on policies that put public health, rather than

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private interests, first. It is therefore urgent for our societies to acquire greater awareness on what is really happening within these domains and unite forces to prevent major damage to the environment, public health and the economy. This article also illustrates the negative consequences resulting from commercial interests being placed before public ones and explores the role that civil society organizations and social movements play in addressing these challenges.

An overview of the case of Mexico

Mexico is one of the countries that is most affected by these changes in agricultural practices. Its rich and balanced traditional diet, based on the cultural and biological diversity of the national territory and centred on the cultivation of *milpa*, as a Mesoamerican crop-growing system, has been shattered by the invasion of highly processed foods and by the implementation of inadequate agricultural practices.

In today's Mexico, the leading causes of death are diabetes and cardiovascular diseases: 10 percent of these deaths are caused by the high intake of sugar-sweetened beverages.¹ Consequently, the majority of the national health budget is used to address these types of preventable chronic diseases (Arredondo and Reyes, 2013). The total cost to treat diseases associated with overweight and obesity, like diabetes, was approximately US\$7 billion in 2012 and it is projected to reach approximately US\$12 billion in 2017, unless effective preventive action is taken (El Poder del Consumidor, 2010).

Almost 70 percent of the population lives with some degree of food insecurity (Mundo-Rosas *et al.*, 2013). 64.8 million Mexicans live in conditions of poverty or even extreme poverty (55.3 percent) (CONEVAL, 2012); 18 percent of under-five-year old children suffer from some form of under-nutrition; 34 percent of schoolchildren, 35 percent of adolescents and 70 percent of adults are overweight or obese; and 14 percent of Mexican adults have been diagnosed with diabetes, while 40 percent with metabolic syndrome (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2012).

The farming situation is also deplorable. While millions of small-scale producers struggle with

poverty, debts and desperation, ten of the biggest agro industries are receiving millions of pesos of government subsidies. In 2011 alone, companies such as Bachoco, Gamesa, Cargill, Gradesa, Maseca, among others, received 1.4 billion pesos of subsidies, while 18 million of the estimated 27 million people living in rural areas do not have access to basic food baskets, more than 50 percent being children deprived of minimum food requirements for their healthy development.² At the same time, imports of products like maize, beans and other foods continue to grow while small- and medium-scale producers work with great efforts and face huge conflicts to be able to produce and commercialize their products.³

Big corporations drive policies that pose risks to family agriculture and public welfare in order to increase their profit margins. Farmers using the *milpa* system, previously self-sufficient and somehow autonomous, have had to migrate due to the damage to the Mexican countryside. The remaining rural populations face inadequate financing and limited incomes, given the serious problems to commercialize their products on the market due to the control of the big agricultural monopolies and intermediaries. In addition, they also confront an increasing risk of transgenic contamination of their crops. Transnational corporations (TNCs) and the Mexican government seek to impose mass-scale production of genetically modified corn, placing the country's viability at risk since Mexico is a site of origin and continued diversification of maize. The Mexican citizenry has been able to defend native maize through a class action suit against genetically modified maize. This suit has faced 63 challenges to date from corporations and the government. While a federal judge passed a precautionary measure that suspends the sowing of all genetically modified maize, pressure and movement by *de facto* powers are present and increasing.⁴

The progressive abandonment of agriculture has evolved in parallel with the emerging dominance of junk food into the Mexican traditional diet. In this transition, the population is left unprotected, lacking guarantees of the rights to information, health, water, and healthy, safe and culturally appropriate food, as well as dignified lives.

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Another example of industry violations and obstructions to public health is the lack of fulfillment of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, generating serious consequences in infancy (Calvillo *et al.*, 2013a). Eighty-five percent of newborns are fed with formula (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2012), which have high levels of added sugar (14–27 percent) (Calvillo *et al.*, 2013b), especially those for six-month old or older babies.

Breastfeeding is one of the most important traditional methods to increase the probability of every infant to survive the first two years of life. The full implementation of the International Code for Marketing of Breastfeeding Substitutes needs to be enforced globally; it is a tool that can help protect infants and small children from the unethical practices from infant and baby food industry (WHO, 1981).

The absence of strong regulations in the public interest has inevitably affected children. Almost 40 percent of preschoolers' energy intake comes from industrialized processed foods and 12 percent of children's total energy comes from soda (González-Castell *et al.*, 2007). Children are highly exposed to junk food marketing, mainly soda and sweets.⁵ In 2010, a Mexican child was exposed, on average, to approximately eleven junk food commercials per hour (El Poder del Consumidor, 2010). Mexicans are the highest global consumers of soda (1631 per year) (Brownell, 2011), processed pastries and instant soups, as well as one of the largest consumers of snacks.⁶

There is a strong footprint of industry presence and pressure on Mexico's new regulations, recently implemented as part of the governmental national strategy to combat the epidemic of overweight, obesity and diabetes. Such new strategy includes regulations on food and beverage front-of-package labelling, promotion of a nutritional stamp on certain products and marketing to children. This is generating confusion among the population and posing great health risks, as these measures recommend a daily intake of 90 g of added sugars and establish a nutritional stamp that allows some products to be publicized to children, promoting them as healthy when they are instead high in sugar, fat and/or salt due to the lax criteria established.⁷

Big Industry and corporate action have been the most significant forces behind obstacles to and blockage of effective regulations to ensure healthy eating habits, environment and systems, from cultivation to consumption.⁸

This was possible because of the State's omission to promote and protect the right to health and to appropriate food for the Mexican population as well as the State actions that favoured private interests over public interests.

Implications of setting public interest as the main concern

A key implication of refocusing on the centrality of public interest is the need to address conflict of interest in policymaking, which comes with a series of additional consequences. This is an issue that requires sensitive handling, especially with regards to the involvement of civil society. Indeed, the past decades witnessed the rise of many civil society organizations that, rather than public interest, emerged from industry or business interests. This has been a *disguise* by the large TNCs to gain access to political discussions, influence them to their favour and ensure they would not interfere with the market interests, even if it would imply affecting public health (Richter, 2005).

Conversely, many other organizations receive grants from industry though neither their spirit nor their actual initiatives aim to promote business interests. The organizations that are not entirely aware that these practices may also interfere with public interest need to understand that, even while their purpose is not to serve business, these activities may still impair judgment in public policy proposals, discussions and decisions.

This has become a key issue for governments, too. Because of the very significant resources spent for the treatment of non-communicable diseases and malnutrition overall – in the world increasing shares of health budgets are destined to these diseases (World Bank, 2011) – governments get seduced and induced to accept money from big corporations leaving public health behind.

Despite the marketing implications and other complications that addressing conflict of interest may bring to society, it is an issue that needs

to be approached properly, transparently and up-forwardly. Human rights, especially regarding infancy, need to be set as an unnegotiable priority, independently of what business interests may be. The rights of children as well as those of the general population must be a priority in all societies, as demonstrated by the Supreme Court of Costa Rica, which prioritized the best interest of the child over corporate interests when ruling on the implementation of regulations on junk food and sweetened sugar beverages inside schools (Alegre *et al.*, 2014).

The role of civil society and social movements for the public interest

It is essential to provide space and means for the effective participation of civil society organizations and social movements in the policy-making process. Citizens and the groups in which they organize themselves are well aware of the need to defend health over corporate interests. Civil society and social movements have provided an important contribution in raising public awareness and carrying out advocacy campaigns on issues such as child-targeted marketing, school food policy, soda tax, effective front-of-package labelling and improvement of public nutrition and health, particularly children's.

Social movements, together with civil society organizations, are also of fundamental importance for the protection of biodiversity and the promotion of sustainable agriculture, both having profound influence on foods systems. They must receive proper support through programmes that favour local food markets as well as public procurement and policies that promote the direct supply of healthy fresh food by small local producers to schools, hospitals and governmental services.

How to move forward?

First of all, the recommendations by legitimate international bodies offer excellent starting points as they provide an important and significant support for citizens and governments to be able to implement the best possible policies and instruments to guarantee public welfare. The WHO

Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children, the General Comment No. 16 (2013) on State Obligations Regarding the Impact of the Business Sector on Children's Rights by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), the already-mentioned International Code for Marketing of Breastfeeding Substitutes, all offer notable examples in this respect.

Furthermore, proposals for 'sustainable food systems' should be based on small and medium agriculture, built on traditional practices and supportive of small-scale food producers. The different innovative mechanisms for production need to be accompanied by traditional methods that protect native seeds and centres of origin from the effects of genetically modified organisms, especially in the places of origin of the crops as failure to do so would inevitably affect the entire world. Biodiversity needs to be an international and national priority and systems for the protection of native seeds and centres of origin need to be established. Real national food sovereignty – one of the defining characters of food systems and essential to combat malnutrition in all its forms – firmly depends on this.

Violators of human rights through unethical procedures must be held accountable. In this respect, it must be acknowledged that the same 'stakeholders' that are joining the effort to address malnutrition may also be those responsible for contributing to the problem in the first place, through their commercial activities and financial aims. This contradiction needs to be highlighted outright so that it can be properly addressed. The process by which partners and stakeholders are selected and integrated into priority action programmes needs to be clear, fair and transparent. Appropriate rules of engagement must protect the policy space against conflict of interest and guarantee that the actions of all partners are carried out in the public interest, with full dedication to human rights and firm commitment to do no harm.

As much as the nutritional quality of food depends on agro-biodiversity, nutritional health depends on the revaluing of traditional diets. To accomplish this, it is necessary to strengthen small- and medium-scale food producers,

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rediscover local foods and traditional diets reinvigorate local markets, establish short-chain commercialization channels that allow direct link between producers and consumers, and promote city, community and school gardens. Traditional diets need to be protected as well as they embody ancestral knowledge that can help ensure humanity's own survival.

Conclusion

Every person has the right to live a quality life. To this end, appropriate and integrated strong regulations need to be promoted for the overall improvement of sustainable food systems. For these policies to be adequate and effective, the proper management of conflict of interests is essential as well as the active involvement of public interest civil society organizations and social movements. In particular, agricultural policies must promote agro-biodiversity, take into consideration traditional practices within each region, and aim to strengthen sustainability and sovereignty with significant support to small- and medium-

scale farmers and food producers. Native seeds and centres of origin need to be protected from contamination of genetically modified organisms, which strongly affect biodiversity and generate negative consequences on ecosystems and population.

Among the various policies that can complement the improvement of sustainable food systems, the following may prove to be particularly important: fiscal measures for sugar-sweetened beverages; regulation on the marketing to children and food labelling; full implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes; permanent campaigns alerting on the risks associated to the consumption of highly processed food products, sugar-sweetened beverages and other unhealthy products, and promoting healthy fresh nutritious food; and, the approval and implementation of an international legally binding instrument on TNCs and other business enterprises with respect to human rights. All these complement regulations, among others that serve the public interest, could be integrated in a single *Global Convention* to protect and promote healthy diets.

Notes

- 1 Available at: <http://elpoderdelconsumidor.org/saludnutricional/10-de-muertes-provocados-por-la-obesidad-en-mexico-se-deben-al-consumo-de-bebidas-azucaradas/>.
- 2 Alonso-Sánchez, Luz María (2012) *Millones en pobreza, 10 grandes empresas absorben subsidios*. El Punto Crítico, 30 November. Available at: <http://www.elpuntocritico.com/noticias-mexico/economia-nacional/50854-millones-en-pobreza-10-grandes-empresas-absorben-subsidios.html>, accessed 10 September 2014.
- 3 Vargas, Uriel (2014) *En riesgo más de 150 mil toneladas de manzana*. El Barzón, 13 March. Available at: <http://elbarzon.mx/2014/03/en-riesgo-mas-de-150-mil-toneladas-de-manzana-el-barzon-chihuahua/>, accessed, 10 September 2014.
- 4 San Vicente A (2013) La defensa de nuestro maíz contra los transgénicos. Blog El Universal, Mexico. Available at: http://blogs.eluniversal.com.mx/weblogs_detalle20220.html, accessed 27 August 2014.
- 5 Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (n.d.) Publicidad de alimentos y bebidas. Available at: <http://www.insp.mx/eppo/blog/2984-publicidad-alimentos-bebidas.html>, accessed 10 September 2014.
- 6 Laboratorio de la Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor (PROFECO) (2014) Pastelillos empacados: una dulce (y densa) tentación. *Revista del Consumidor*. Available at: http://revistadelconsumidor.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/RC445_Pastelitos.pdf, accessed 10 September 2014.
- 7 El Poder del Consumidor (2014) *Impera caos y contradicción en los criterios de gobierno para combatir la obesidad* 14 May. Available at: <http://elpoderdelconsumidor.org/saludnutricional/impera-caos-y-contradiccion-en-el-combate-gubernamental-la-obesidad/>, accessed 10 September 2014.
- 8 Bellagio Obesity Conference (2013) The Bellagio Declaration. Available at: http://bellagioobesity2013.web.unc.edu/files/2013/11/bellagio_declaration_11-11-13.pdf, accessed 10 September 2014.

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