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Public health and food systems in emerging economies under corporate influence

Book review by
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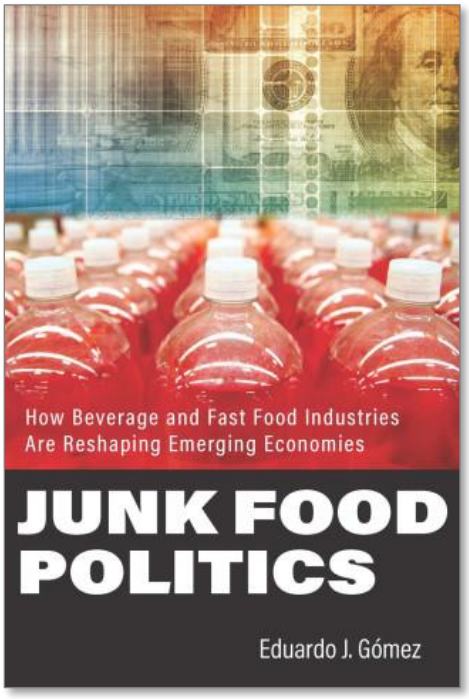

Review of *Junk Food Politics: How Beverage and Fast-Food Industries Are Reshaping Emerging Economies*, by Eduardo J. Gómez. (2023). Published by Johns Hopkins University Press. Available as hardcover, audiobook, and eBook; 408 pages. Publisher's website: https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title/12450/junk-food-politics

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Noncommunicable diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes have become among the most serious public health challenges of our time, especially in developing countries and emerging economies. Many governments have implemented nutrition education and awareness campaigns, but rates of obesity and diabetes continue to rise. In *Junk Food Politics: How Beverage and Fast-Food Industries Are Reshaping Emerging Economies*, Eduardo J. Gómez asks a clear and urgent question: why do these diseases increase despite stated government commitments to control them?

Gómez argues that the dominant explanation is incomplete. Public discussion often frames obesity as a consequence of lifestyle change, modernization, or poor individual choices. In contrast, this book shifts attention from personal behavior to political and economic structures. The rise of diet-related diseases is not only about what people choose to eat. It is also about how global trade, investment regimes, and state-level decisions shape food environments. Gómez shows that noncommunicable diseases are connected to the political economy of food systems.

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Gómez situates the expansion of ultra-processed food within the broader wave of economic liberalization that reshaped many emerging economies after the 1990s. Market reforms and trade agreements reduced barriers to foreign investment and opened markets to multinational corporations. At the same time, regulatory pressures in North America and Western Europe pushed companies to seek new markets. Slowing sales, soda taxes, and growing public scrutiny made emerging economies attractive sites for growth. As import restrictions declined and retail sectors modernized, global food and beverage firms scaled rapidly across Latin America, Asia, and Africa. These shifts coincided with urbanization, income growth, and social programs that increased purchasing power. Weaker marketing restrictions and governments willing to partner with industry for development objectives further facilitated this shift. Expansion reflected regulatory pressures in advanced economies and market opportunities within emerging markets. In countries such as Brazil, cash transfer programs expanded consumption without parallel investment in strong nutrition regulation. The result was not simply economic development, but construction of food environments increasingly saturated with ultra-processed products. Gómez's point is not that modernization automatically produces poor diets, but that liberalization without regulatory safeguards creates structural opportunities for corporate expansion.

Using case studies from India, China, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa, Gómez identifies several common industry strategies despite differences in political systems. One important strategy is direct political engagement. Corporations lobby policymakers, participate in regulatory committees, and sometimes benefit from revolving door employment between government and industry. They also fund research and academic institutions, which can shape how nutrition problems are defined and discussed. Through these mechanisms, companies gain access to policy spaces and influence regulatory debates. Another strategy involves policy framing. Industry actors often emphasize exercise and physical activity instead of focusing on dietary regulation. They promote narratives of individual responsibility, suggesting that obesity results from personal choices rather than structural conditions. At the same time, they resist clear definitions of junk food, creating ambiguity that delays regulation and weakens enforcement.

Corporate social responsibility programs play an additional role. Companies sponsor school exercise initiatives, support women entrepreneurship schemes, and partner in anti-poverty or anti-hunger campaigns. These activities increase corporate legitimacy and present firms as development partners. In some cases, companies expand aggressively into remote regions where health services are scarce. The example of Nestlé boats delivering branded products to isolated communities in the Amazon illustrates how commercial expansion can reach even the most vulnerable populations. In certain markets, sugary drinks are priced lower than bottled water, which further shapes consumption patterns among low-income groups.

Governments, according to Gómez, are not simply passive actors. They operate within political and economic constraints. Partnerships with multinational firms can offer visible short-term achievements, such as investment inflows, job creation, and economic growth. Where poverty reduction and development are urgent priorities, collaboration with industry may appear attractive. However, many countries face institutional weaknesses, including limited enforcement capacity, fragmented regulatory authority, and inadequate conflict of interest rules, that reduce the effectiveness of public health regulation.

Policy responses therefore follow a familiar pattern. Governments prioritize education and exercise initiatives, while marketing restrictions and fiscal measures remain limited or contested. Soda taxes and labeling reforms have been introduced in some countries, yet structural transformation of food environments remains partial. The health consequences are significant. The increase in obesity and type 2 diabetes is particularly severe among children and low-income populations. Rising disease burdens place additional strain on health systems. Gómez also describes feedback loops that make reform more difficult. As health costs increase, governments may rely further on industry partnerships for funding and program delivery.

Corporate legitimacy deepens, and regulatory change becomes politically harder.

Gómez's analysis resonates with the food politics tradition associated with scholars such as Marion Nestle, who documented industry influence on nutrition policy in the U.S. (Nestle, 2019). Gómez extends this lens to emerging economies, situating similar dynamics within processes of economic liberalization and institutional constraint. While the book offers a compelling account of corporate influence across diverse contexts, some counterexamples receive limited attention. Chile's comprehensive food labeling and marketing law, including front-of-package warning labels and restrictions on sales in schools, was associated with significant reductions in purchases of products high in sugar, sodium, and saturated fat during its first phase of implementation (Taillie et al., 2021). A deeper examination of these cases could have further clarified the institutional factors that enable more successful reform.

Junk Food Politics reframes the rise of noncommunicable diseases as a problem rooted in political and institutional structures rather than individual choice. The book advances a persuasive argument that meaningful reform requires confronting the incentives, alliances, and power relations that shape regulatory environments. In doing so, Gómez encourages a more holistic approach to food system reform, that moves beyond individual behavior and addresses the power relations embedded in global markets. As governments commit to improving population health yet struggle to implement effective regulation, the book offers a timely contribution to debates on global health governance and food systems transformation.

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