

'Big Food' and Children's Health

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To understand children's diets and obesity rates, we need to consider the commercial influences on what children eat and drink.

I.Family data shows that children who view more television advertising consume more sugar-sweetened drinks.¹ Even children who have less preference for sweetened foods eat more of them if they see more television adverts.² The children we studied also tend to eat foods that are more energy-dense than recommended.³ We found that about 80% of children asked for items advertised on television, at least sometimes; where parents agreed to these requests more often, the child's diet was higher in sugar and fat; and the children who asked for advertised foods were more likely to become overweight.⁴

These results correspond to well-known findings. Food and drink marketing focuses on less healthy, processed foods. The overwhelming majority of foods aimed at children are high in fat, sugar and/or salt.⁵

How can we explain these facts, and what can be done to change things?

Why aren't cabbages advertised?

The answer lies with the commercial opportunities presented by different types of food.

Modern economies are dominated by business corporations. Compared to individual entrepreneurs or other ways of doing business, the strength of corporations is long-term, capital-intensive production. Corporations can own and manage factories, research facilities, trademarks and brands.

Less well-known is how business corporations depend on the state for their existence.⁶ Corporate markets are not 'free.' They rest on laws that require everyone to recognize them as legal and economic actors. In other words, business corporations could not exist without state coercion. The law requires all of us to treat corporate employees and directors, when they are doing their jobs, as representatives of 'the corporation.'

As organisations, then, corporations persist even when individual members leave. They can grow to an immense size. Hence their special ability to engage in capital-intensive production and marketing.

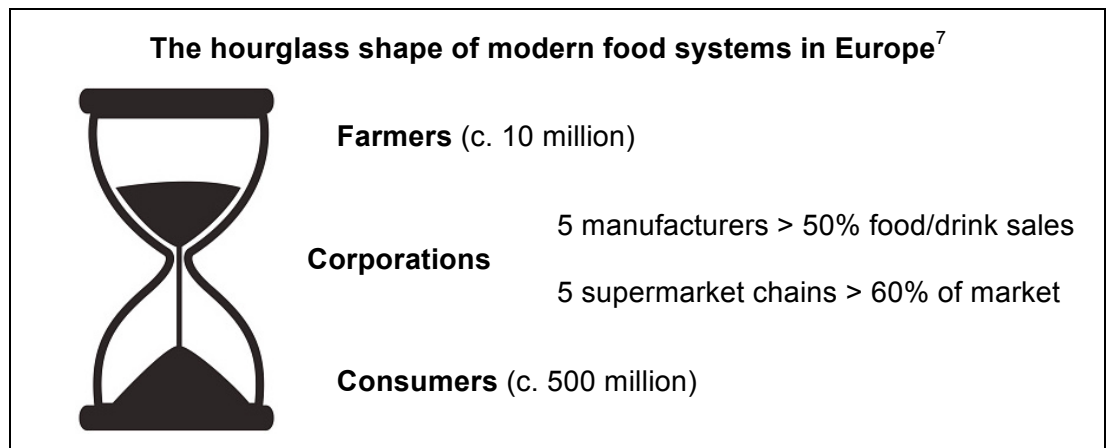


"Go green!" – Estonian public health campaign
(<http://www.toitumine.ee/kampaania/viisvilja/tai-plakatid.pdf>)

So far as food and drinks are concerned, this means food processing

To get cabbages to consumers, you need a distribution network and shops. The special strength of corporations lies elsewhere – in creating branded, factory-made products. Factories need reliable inputs – for example, commodity crops like wheat, soya, maize, sugar and oils that don't depend on seasonal factors. Brands and trademarks can only be applied to specially formulated products.

By contrast, whole foods like cabbages are hard to brand, more perishable, and more seasonal. They don't present comparable commercial opportunities.



Food processing is problematic from a health point of view

Food processing works best with reliable, storable ingredients. Unlike home cooking, it aims to create products that will keep as long as possible. Both these factors reduce water content. This means products are more energy dense – they tend to contain more calories by weight than whole foods or home-cooked foods.

If used at all, fruits and vegetables tend to be already processed – for example, as extracts or concentrates. So the fibre content of processed foods tends to be low, too. Sugar, fat and salt are cheap ways to make a product taste better. These factors also increase energy density.

Sugar and salt also help to increase shelf life. Heat treatments prolong shelf life and improve food safety, by killing pathogens, but they have the side effect of reducing the amount of nutrients.

The upshot is that processed foods tend to be more energy dense, making it easier for people to consume more calories. At the same time, they tend to have lower nutrient content.

In general, it's more difficult and expensive to make healthy processed foods and drinks.



Foods and drinks marketed to children by companies that have signed the EU Pledge. This is a self-regulatory pledge not to advertise products to under 12s unless they fulfil specific nutritional criteria. Foodwatch found that only 10% of these products (right) met World Health Organization criteria for a balanced diet.⁸

Can companies change this?

Many governments have hoped that food and drink corporations can focus on making healthier products or limit their marketing of unhealthy products. ‘Self-regulation’ is the idea that companies will do this voluntarily – for example, by not marketing ‘kids’ food.’ These hopes go against the basic economics of food processing.

In some respects, ‘Big Food’ is immensely powerful. Food and drink markets have been profoundly reshaped by corporate business models. The relative prices of processed foods have fallen; opportunities to buy them have become ubiquitous. The companies involved have grown very large; they advertise, lobby politicians, and influence international trade agreements. At the same time, local produce markets and independent retailers of whole foods (high-street green-grocers, for example) play an ever smaller role.

Nonetheless, big food and drink companies are caught by their own business models. Competition drives them to maximise sales in all possible markets – including ‘kids’ food.’ Products that don’t rely heavily on cheap, storable ingredients are bound to be more expensive. **In other words, ‘Big Food’ is less powerful than it seems.**

Regulation in the cause of freedom

Regulations that limit marketing to children, or taxes that increase the price of sugar-sweetened drinks, are often presented as restrictive or interfering. But corporate markets are not free markets. Only legal regimes, and ultimately state coercion, enable corporations to exist in the first place. In food and drink markets, this leads to public health problems. Competitive pressures leave companies no choice: they must promote processed foods and drinks, even to children.

Like the legal restrictions that enable business corporations to exist in the first place, regulations can enable companies. For example, rules against marketing to children free companies from the worry that competitors will take over this market. They can relieve the pressures on parents that arise from marketing to children. They can free children from commercial influences they don’t yet understand.

Regulation sounds limiting. But it can create freedoms that really matter.

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- ¹ Olafsdottir et al. 2014. Young Children’s Screen Activities, Sweet Drink Consumption and Anthropometry. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 68: 223–28.
 - ² Lissner et al. 2012. Television Habits in Relation to Overweight, Diet and Taste Preferences in European Children: The IDEFICS Study. *European Journal of Epidemiology* 27 (9): 705–15.
 - ³ Hebestreit et al. 2014. Dietary Energy Density in Young Children across Europe. *International Journal of Obesity* 38: S124-S134.
 - ⁴ Huang et al. 2016. Pester Power and Its Consequences: Do European Children’s Food Purchasing Requests Relate to Diet and Weight Outcomes? *Public Health Nutrition* 19: 2393–2403.
 - ⁵ Cairns et al. 2013. Systematic Reviews of the Evidence on the Nature, Extent and Effects of Food Marketing to Children: A Retrospective Summary. *Appetite* 62: 209–15.
 - ⁶ Ciepley. 2013. Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation. *American Political Science Review* 107: 139–58.
 - ⁷ Figures are approximate. See Eurostat. 2017. Farm Structure Statistics (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Farm_structure_statistics) and DG Agriculture and Rural Development. 2015. EU Agricultural Economic Briefs No. 4 (http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/markets-and-prices/market-briefs/pdf/04_en.pdf).
 - ⁸ On the EU Pledge, see <http://www.eu-pledge.eu>. Photo and findings from Foodwatch. 2015. Kindermarketing für Lebensmittel: Freiwillige Selbstverpflichtung der Lebensmittelwirtschaft (‘EU Pledge’) auf dem Prüfstand. <https://www.foodwatch.org/de/informieren/kinderernaehrung/mehr-zum-thema/produkttest-selbstverpflichtung/>.