



COMMENTARY

Commercial determinants of health: a proposed research agenda

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In 2017, 45.5 million people died globally from non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and more than 75% of these deaths occurred in the Global South (IHME 2019; WHO 2018). Economically, it is expected that mortality and disability attributed to NCDs will cost low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) \$84 billion in just 10 years (Kickbusch 2015). It is imperative that the public health community takes action through research, intervention, and policy implementation to better understand and combat NCDs in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contribute to a healthier population.

NCDs are influenced by many individual, social, environmental and commercial determinants (Knai et al. 2018). While the influence of corporations on public health has long been recognized, the community still struggles with how to manage the negative health impacts resulting from corporate activity (Wipfli and Mack 2017). This commentary aims to encourage the development of an international and multi-sectoral research agenda to target commercial determinants of health (CDoH)—“strategies and approaches used by the private sector to promote products and choices that are detrimental to health” (Kickbusch et al. 2016). Due to the primarily conceptual

nature of current literature on CDoH, we recognize that there is a lack of clarity in how these terms and themes are used in research and practice, and that one definition cannot summarize all of the facets of CDoH and the private industry. However, this definition allows us to evaluate important tactics used by corporations to influence health decisions of consumers, and how public health can begin to address these issues. The proposed agenda is a global reflection based on literature review and discussions with researchers and practitioners from different fields in the USA, UK, Australia and Global South including Bangladesh, Zambia, Pakistan and Vietnam. By shifting the public health focus from individual health risk behaviors to CDoH, public health research can aid in addressing the association between NCDs and commercial risk factors and highlight the impact of the private industry on the overall health of populations worldwide.

Given the immense impact of NCDs on health globally and the existing evidence of the role of CDoH on health, establishing a research agenda is essential in making progress toward reducing the burden of such diseases. We propose a research agenda that is based on the exploration of literature on CDoH and the analysis of public health frameworks considered the most relevant to this topic. We believe such an agenda is integral for all stakeholders involved in the CDoH, with a specific focus on academics who play an important role in shaping interventions and policies that have implications for population health.

The agenda focuses on eight areas (Table 1)—four conceptual domains and the four pathways by which industry impacts health. Research is key on the following four key domains—conceptual framework, governance, accountability and transparency—that are critical to a consideration of CDoH. The domain of “conceptual framework” aims to develop definitions of CDoH and related concepts, and identify relevant theories and methods for studying them. In the absence of strong conceptual tools, current public health models and the policies that they inform may risk framing public health problems and solutions in ways that conceal the role of the private sector in shaping population health outcomes (Maani et al. 2020).

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Table 1 Proposed research agenda for commercial determinants of health

Domains	Goals	Example research topics
Conceptual Framework	To develop a system of concepts, theories, frameworks and methods for the study of CDoH	Conceptual framework for systematically analyzing the impact of CDoH on global health burden Methodological framework for studying corporate tactics on national and global levels
Governance	To assess different models of governing CDoH and reducing risk exposure	Explore different governance mechanisms in different sectors (tobacco, alcohol, commercial food and beverage) and across these sectors Assess the role of global health institutions in the governance of CDoH
Accountability	To understand the structures, processes and the implications of corporate accountability on CDoH	Map and assess accountability systems across difference sectors for reducing global NCD burden Test monitoring systems for effectively assessing corporate accountability in global health
Transparency	To systematically assess corporate involvement in policy processes and document “evidence of harms”	Document corporate practices and related health outcomes—assess pathways and metrics of outcomes Evaluate approaches for transparent management of conflict of interest
Pathways	Goals	Suggested research topics
Marketing	To develop effective strategies for addressing the harmful influence of corporate marketing practices on consumers	Explore interventions for protecting vulnerable populations from the influence of corporate marketing activities Measure health outcomes of specific marketing activities
Lobbying	To address the influence of corporate lobbying on health outcomes	Develop countertactics for addressing the impact of lobbying on health Document corporate lobbying as a growing powerful industry in developing world
Corporate Social Responsibility Strategies	To understand the impact of corporate social responsibility strategies on global health	Map approaches for exposing corporate social responsibility strategies and their effects on population health Measure the influence of social responsibility strategies on different stakeholders
Supply Chains	To study national and global level policies that shape current supply chains	Define the relationship between expanding supply chain and health policy decisions on national and global levels Understand the ethical implications of expanding supply chains globally

Acknowledging the responsibility of corporations in creating complex patterns of inequity within and across societies worldwide, studying effective models for governing corporate influence, and reducing the exposure to the risk is urgently needed. Understanding business power of for-profit corporations in shaping the world economy from multi-disciplinary perspective is essential for strengthening global governance (Lee et al. 2017). Another area that requires amplified scholarship is the understanding of structures and processes for corporate accountability and their implications for public health. There is also a need for advocating for more ethical corporate practices; the public health community could develop approaches for systematically identifying and documenting unethical

corporate practices and approaches for transparent management of conflicts of interest.

In our proposed research agenda, we also highlight the need for research addressing four key pathways—marketing, lobbying, corporate social responsibility and supply chains of private corporations—through which private industry exerts influence on consumers and public policy. The “collective harm” produced through the marketing activities of large multinational corporations is alarming and deserves attention of public health researchers. Developing effective strategies for addressing the harmful influence of corporate marketing practices on consumers, especially vulnerable populations is needed. Focusing research on political tactics such as lobbying is essential for

identifying and implementing successful countertactics for the betterment of global public health outcomes. We need to better understand the implications of corporate social responsibility strategies on global health outcomes, develop approaches for exposing these tactics, and communicating the health implications to consumers. Finally, the influence of ever-growing supply chains on CDoH and related NCD burden suggests studying national and global level policies that shape supply chains. This agenda does not specify research methods or specific approaches to exploring issues to develop a better understanding of CHoH; and does not claim to be exhaustive. Rather it begins to define issues within these eight domains which can become the topics of future research studies around the world.

Given the state of current evidence on the effects of the private sector on NCDs, it is critical to prioritize funding and promote research in this area. Multi-disciplinary collaborations should be at the forefront of a global research agenda which addresses the role of corporations in influencing consumption, and define what responsibility they hold in addressing the burden of NCDs on populations and the economy, particularly in the most vulnerable populations of the Global South. It is also important that this research considers the ethical, legal, and social implications of the CDoH, and how we can use findings to strengthen and regulate health systems and guide policy implementation. We hope that this proposed agenda helps initiate a global discourse on approaches to CDoH.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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