



August 2018 Open Letter

to the President of the United Nations General Assembly, His Excellency Miroslav Lajčák on the Political Declaration on the 2018 Third High-Level meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases¹

Excellencies,

Recalling the [Statement of Concern endorsed by 140 organizational members and supporters of the Conflict of Interest Coalition in June-September 2011](#) at the First High Level Meeting about undisclosed and unregulated conflicts of interest in NCD policy-making and advocacy, and the [further call in June-July 2014 by 161 groups and networks representing more than 2,000 groups worldwide for effective safeguards against conflicts of interest in the Political Declaration of the Second High Level Meeting](#), we note with growing concern that:

- The final Political Declaration must include clear and unambiguous calls for express conflict of interest safeguards especially concerning the food, alcohol, and pharmaceutical industries.** A [seven-page Zero Draft of the Political Declaration](#) did not mention conflict of interest safeguards (except in relation to the tobacco industry), not even in relation to the notoriously harmful practices of infant formula companies.² Instead, the *Zero Draft* made 10 references to multi-stakeholder partnerships and voluntary actions by industry and only one general reference to taking regulatory and fiscal measures. Unless the final Declaration emphasizes much stricter regulatory measures, United Nations Member States will chiefly promote voluntary measures by industry for the 14 years between the 2011 Declaration and the 2025 review, even as they lament slow improvements or worsening health in the populations they serve.
- The final Political Declaration must emphasize dietary goals that are consistent with modern evidence about the relationship between diet and disease and the greatest population attributable risks.** The *Zero Draft* recommends changes to seven features of diet (at sections OP12 and OP18(b)) [only three of which are top-seven risks according to the Global Burden of Disease project](#), reflecting a discordance with nutrition science that could undermine achievement of the stated goals of the Political Declaration. For instance, although one of the two references wisely recognizes the importance of promoting fruit and vegetable consumption, the text unwisely falls short of World Health Organization guidance by:
 - o ignoring inadequate consumption of whole grains, nuts/seeds, and fibre,
 - o proposing to reduce “total sugars” instead of “free sugars,” and
 - o proposing to reduce “total fats” instead of reducing and replacing saturated and trans fats with polyunsaturated fats.

¹ And to His Excellency Mr. Sebastiano Cardi, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Italy, and His Excellency Mr. Elbio Rosselli, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Uruguay, co-facilitators of the negotiations and consultations by email to miroslav.lajcak@un.org, eva.schafer@un.org, christiana.mele@esteri.it, and claudia.garcia@mrree.gub.uy.

² In 1981, the World Health Assembly adopted the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes*, reinforced and clarified by subsequent resolutions of the World Health Assembly.

3. **The Political Declaration should be based on input from the most qualified experts and civil society representatives that are free from conflicts of interest.** The draft accepts without reservation the report, [*Time to Deliver*](#), of the [World Health Organization’s “Independent High-Level Commission on Noncommunicable Diseases,”](#) at least six members of which have substantial undeclared financial conflicts of interest, mostly involving the pharmaceutical and food industries. The Commission report did not disclose member votes on its policy advice, but indicated at page 4 that minority or even single-member opinions of Commissioners could veto recommendations (such as, for instance, whether to tax or increase taxes on sugar sweetened beverages or hold companies to account. There is no indication from the record that Commissioners were required to recuse themselves from discussions and decisions related to their financial interests.) The Commission repeated the 16 “best buys” without noting that the taxation, labelling, and advertising restrictions for alcohol and tobacco are much more comprehensive and decisive than the four food-related measures which apply only to sodium-reduction. Likewise, though history has shown that the for-profit pharmaceutical industry’s behavior has sometimes been at odds with public health efforts to prevent and treat infectious disease, the *Zero Draft* exhibited no concern and proposed no safeguards.
4. Likewise, speakers invited to set the stage for discussions at the High-Level Meeting’s July 5, 2018 interactive consultation session included the:
- **International Food and Beverage Alliance**, an alliance of 10 of the world’s largest food companies,
 - **International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations**, an alliance of the world’s largest drug manufacturers,
 - **NCD Alliance**, an organization that purports to represent public interest civil society, was founded with a \$1 million grant from the world’s largest medical technology company nearly a decade ago, and has continued to receive approximately the same amount of funding annually from global pharmaceutical companies, according to the partial set of financial reports on the NCD Alliance’s website.
 - **WHO Independent High-level Commission on NCDs**, (two speaking spots) for the Commission the advice of which allows individual or minority voting members to veto recommendations, [includes several members that have conflicts of interest](#) such as:
 - Arnaud Bernaert is employed by the World Economic Forum which is funded by US\$600,000 each from [Nestlé, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Unilever, Novartis, Pfizer, Takeda Pharmaceutical, and his former employer, Royal Phillips \(a health tech company\)](#),
 - Katie Dain is the CEO of NCD Alliance which has been funded extensively by medical technology and pharmaceutical companies,
 - Festus Gontebanye Mogae is the former president of Botswana and [chairman of a supermarket chain](#),
 - Eric Hargen is the Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services as well as a [shareholder at the](#) law firm of Greenberg Taurig [and one its lawyers specializing in defending food, agriculture, alcohol, pharmaceutical, and health care companies](#), and
 - Jack Ma, Alibaba Group has extensive investments in the [pharmaceutical retail industry](#) and [“food delivery business.”](#)

Respectfully submitted,



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