

Unravelling the commercial determinants of health



In early March, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 200 people—including former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon—signed a letter strongly criticising pharmaceutical companies for putting a desire to make extraordinary profits before the needs of humanity. Selling publicly funded vaccines, treatments, and tests to the highest bidder resulted in inequities that cost more than a million lives, while private companies made billions of dollars. The signatories called on world leaders to ensure that such an injustice is never repeated.

The conflict between profits and health equity is not new. The global health community fought for decades to provide access to antiretrovirals for patients with HIV/AIDS in less-resourced settings. Many commercial actors attempt to negatively influence national and international policies, undermine science, or to directly attack individuals calling out their actions. The recent *Lancet* Series on breastfeeding showed how an extensive network of lobbying by formula milk companies has derailed progress on breastfeeding education.

This history speaks to the central importance to health equity of the commercial determinants of health, the subject of a Series published in this issue of *The Lancet*, led by Rob Moodie of the University of Melbourne, along with authors spanning 15 countries and six continents, with the support of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation of Australia. The headline findings are startling: four industries (tobacco, unhealthy food, fossil fuel, and alcohol) are responsible for at least a third of global deaths per year. Yet much of the work to understand the harmful (or beneficial) impact of commercial actors has to date been done in health research silos. Each field faces many of the same tactical battles and strategies without a unified agenda to protect health. There is a lack of consensus across fields of health to define and understand the commercial determinants of health. The *Lancet* Series seeks to remedy this long-standing and complex situation with a consensus definition of the commercial determinants of health (“systems, practices, and pathways through which commercial actors drive health and equity”), a framing to understand commercial entities’ impact on health, and a commitment to address its challenges in a holistic way.

The Series authors set out a bold vision in which governments, commercial actors, and civil society

contribute first and foremost to improving health and societal wellbeing. Such a vision is needed urgently. As the second paper in the Series outlines, commercial actors are diverse and many play a vital role in society, but the products and practices of many are having increasingly negative impacts on human and planetary health and equity. The Series provides a comprehensive agenda for action, recognising the need for regenerative business models and accountable transparent policies (including an end to commercial actors opposition to health regulation and policies).

Moodie emphasises that the Series is not anti-business; it is pro-health. There are some notable good models of pro-health-acting businesses. For example, nearly 200 leading financial institutions (which together manage more than US\$16 trillion) have signed a pledge to support tobacco-free policies across lending, investment, and insurance. However, although Environmental, Social and Governance frameworks are increasingly used to guide more responsible investment, they still lack specific health indicators. Health needs to become a crucial consideration of investor frameworks and global capital markets. Doing so will require the adoption of different economic models, new legislative and regulatory measures, civil society advocacy and accountability, and better corporate social responsibility. Governments must be empowered to encourage businesses to prioritise positive health impacts. As Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, writes in an accompanying Comment, public health cannot progress without action on the commercial determinants of health. *The Lancet* welcomes the upcoming WHO Congress and first Annual Report on the commercial determinants of health, especially in helping to address non-communicable diseases. Given their huge unresolved impacts, the commercial determinants of health must be recognised—and funded—as a crucial field of research.

Commercial actors and government leaders have a vital opportunity to protect and improve health and advance health equity. The findings of this Series should embolden young researchers, communities, and new government and business leadership to imagine, co-design, and—importantly—invest in a world where human and planetary health is always prioritised over profit. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the letter on COVID-19 technologies see <https://app.box.com/s/016uv7schj90mdchxm64gt9ckli81w9>

For the *Lancet* Series on breastfeeding see <https://www.thelancet.com/series/Breastfeeding-2023>

For more on the Tobacco Free Finance Pledge see <https://tobaccofreeportfolios.org/the-pledge>