

On preserving integrity and advancing health policy debates: author's reply to Mejía & Garzón

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We thank Andrés Mejía and Ximena Garzón's for comments¹ regarding our work published recently,² agreeing with our concern about the undue influence of the food and beverages industry on Ecuador's child malnutrition strategy and the need for greater regulation and transparency in the design and implementation of Ecuador's national nutrition policy. We would like to address their comments in two parts. First, we will point out the omissions and factual errors in the letter and then we will summarize the points raised about our article.

First, an important omission is that it was during Garzón's tenure as Minister of Health that several key events described in the article took place: 1) the Life Course Plan Secretariat was renamed the Ecuador Free of Child Malnutrition Secretariat to focus on this single health condition; REDNI (an industry representative, according to Mejía and Garzón's own admission) was established; 2) the tax deduction mechanism was approved; and 3) the Intersectoral Plan to Prevent and Reduce Chronic Child Malnutrition was published, outlining some of the Advisory Council powers (see figure 1 in our article). Additionally, Mejía is the editor of a publication on child malnutrition in Ecuador acknowledging funding from REDNI, featured on the Advisory Council's website.³ This lack of disclosure of conflict of interest underscores the need for increased transparency from everyone involved in Ecuador's strategy to combat child malnutrition in Ecuador, including the Advisory Council members Mejía and Garzón. Notably, although the Advisory Council's website claims Mejía represents Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ), there is no evidence of current affiliation on the university's website.

Second, an important factual error in Mejía and Garzón's letter is the classification of the Advisory Council as a "civil society organization" (CSO). Given that its members include government officials, United

Nations (UN) agency representatives, and business executives, this categorization contrasts with accepted definitions of a CSO.⁴ Their response to our paper suggests that we claim the corporate sector has "disproportionate influence," a term we never used in our paper. In addition, they minimize the role of corporate representatives in the council by noting that they make up only 16% of its membership. However, this overlooks how recent executive orders and agreements, particularly over the past four years, have increasingly favored the food and beverage industry, which are recognized globally for having a role in the rise of obesity. Executive Order 645 (January 2023), reducing taxes on alcoholic, sugar-sweetened beverages, and tobacco, exemplifies this trend and is discussed in our article. Additional examples include the praise by the Advisory Council's President of Tonicorp, owned by the Coca Cola Company, on the council's website.⁵

Now, we respond to the comments on our paper. First, we disagree with the suggestion that we should examine a draft bill that has not been publicly released (i.e., it appears only the Advisory Council has access to it). Our methodology, informed by Bennet et al.'s framework for monitoring corporate practices,⁶ and the broader commercial determinants of health literature, focuses on analyzing existing policies, like the tax deductions and reductions we have discussed. Second, the criticism that our research relied solely on publicly available documents and internet searches overlooks the fact that these methods allow anyone to verify our findings. This ensures our study's replicability and potential for further research. Third, while we agree that more research is needed to evaluate the impact of the current national strategy, we question why this would not involve assessing the necessity of a special Secretariat in contrast to bolstering existing structures like the Ministry of Health's primary care, the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion network, and the



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dispensaries of the Peasant Social Security that are located in rural areas, where malnutrition reaches the highest rates.

Our paper highlights how the Ecuadorian government has taken steps to institutionalize corporate influence in its efforts to address child malnutrition. We maintain our conclusion that recent executive orders and agreements have created a favorable environment for food and beverage corporations. In many ways, Mejía and Garzón's letter makes our point—two members of the Advisory Council of the Secretariat, tasked with combating child malnutrition, are requesting we steer the discussion away from evidence on the commercial determinants of health and nutrition. Unless measures for transparency and accountability are implemented (which we hope will be included in the draft bill they mention), public health integrity is indeed at risk. Perhaps the Ecuadorian government can begin by aligning with the position of the Latin American Society of Nutrition (SLAN) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) against partnering with the food and beverage industries.

Contributors

All authors contributed to drafting and editing the correspondence. All authors reviewed and approved the final version.

Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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