

Perspective

# Commercial Determinants of Health in Africa: A Look Behind Health Literacy

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**Abstract:** Modern globalization has profoundly affected public health in Africa, promoting the widespread consumption of unhealthy products through aggressive marketing and mass media. In Luanda, Angola, traditional diets are increasingly replaced by sugary drinks and ultra-processed foods, illustrating the influence of commercial determinants of health (CDoH). Multinational corporations exploit weak regulatory frameworks, low health literacy, and social vulnerabilities, contributing to a rapid nutritional transition and the emergence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. This article highlights how structural economic and commercial forces, rather than individual lifestyle choices alone, drive these “industrial epidemics” and exacerbate health disparities. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated political action, regulation of the food and beverage industry, promotion of health literacy, and accountability mechanisms to hold corporations responsible for their impact. By empowering communities and fostering systemic change, African nations can mitigate the health consequences of commercial pressures and support sustainable public health development.

**Keywords:** Commercial Determinants; Health; Africa; Health Literacy.

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## 1. Introduction

Modern times have presented many challenges across all continents. The impact of globalisation on healthcare manifests in various ways, from the rapid spread of diseases across borders to the idealisation of a fun and modern lifestyle, boosted by digital content on social media and the resulting adoption of unhealthy behaviours. These aspects of modern life have extended beyond the pace of transportation, leading to the widespread distribution of unhealthy products through mass media and aggressive marketing, which has transformed them into global consumer goods.

In Luanda, Angola’s capital, there is an increasing shift away from traditional diets towards sugary drinks and processed foods. This vivid illustration highlights a broader and more concerning reality: the increasing influence of commercial determinants of health (CDoH) across the African continent. The spread of unhealthy foods and lifestyles has not occurred by accident; it has been actively promoted by powerful multinational corporations that, over decades, have entrenched their brands and steered global consumption towards products detrimental to health. Developing countries have been particularly exposed to this shift, as their political and health systems already burdened by infectious diseases lack the capacity to mount a timely and effective response to its consequences.

This article asserts that unsustainable global economic paradigms actively contribute to an “industrial epidemic” that undermines the public health progress achieved in recent decades. By prioritizing profit and market expansion over population health, these economic systems have markedly altered daily life patterns and exacerbated existing health disparities in numerous African nations. Limited health literacy amplifies this vulnerability, rendering communities more susceptible to the persuasive marketing tactics employed by multinational corporations. Coupled with social disadvantages, inadequate regulatory frameworks, and persistent commercial pressures to consume, these factors engender environments conducive to the rapid dissemination of harmful products and behaviors, thereby posing a significant challenge to public health across the continent. The paper focuses on Africa, but also applies to developing countries, where political and health systems are already struggling with a high burden of infectious diseases and lack the capacity for rapid intervention to control the consequences of adopting these trends.

## 2. Commercial determinants of health in Africa and their implications

Human behavior is influenced by several factors, or social determinants of health, which are well described in the literature, and by another set of economic determinants that also affect people's health. For this reason, they deserve the attention of the scientific community. In a context where there is poverty, low levels of general literacy, little sensitivity of health sector programs to promoting health literacy, and a growing proliferation of commercial groups focused on the distribution of unhealthy products, it becomes a huge challenge for everyone to have a healthy diet, especially those with low levels of health literacy. This scenario may be prevalent in some developing countries, particularly in certain African nations.

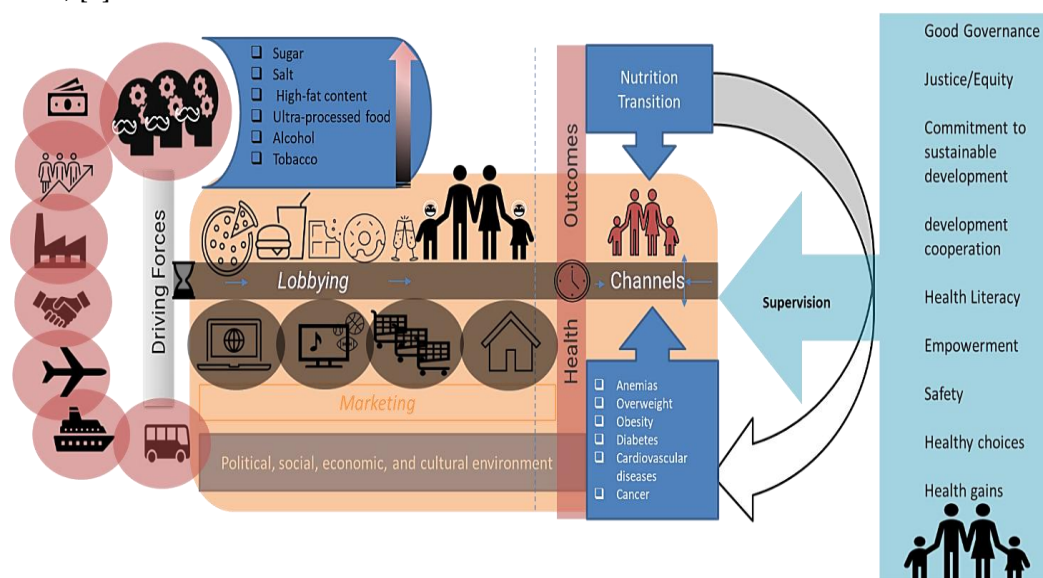
Health literacy in Africa is not just a promising research topic, but an important strategy in combating the influence of commercial determinants of health. Governments and professionals need to promote understanding and the acquisition of personal competencies that improve individual and collective health decisions within the population. However, it's important to note that health literacy is influenced by numerous factors, such as the level of education. Although education is a decisive factor in determining the health and development of a population, it also empowers individuals with the freedom and knowledge necessary to make informed choices in various areas of life. The adoption of effective measures to promote health literacy in Africa is an aspect that requires time and careful analysis, suitable for inclusion in the political and economic agenda as a possible measure to be implemented in each country, adapting to its specific dynamics and context.

The world's dietary pattern has undergone a nutritional transition from consuming foods rich in fibre, vitamins, and antioxidants, such as fruit, vegetables, and greens, to high-energy-density foods rich in saturated fats, sugar, and sodium [1, 2]. This transition can be linked to the intensification of the consumption of legal drugs such as alcoholic beverages and tobacco, probably because they accompany the dietary pattern and increase the consumption of illegal drugs. Licit and illicit drugs do not add any nutritional value to the human body [1]. To illustrate how this may have changed in Africa, 20 or 30 years ago, a child living in the suburbs of Luanda (Angola), also known as slum areas, would typically consume a portion of sweet potato or manioc (cassava) with tea for breakfast. Now, children in Luanda are seen consuming sweet and carbonated soft drinks and cakes for breakfast, without any adults realising the dietary error and the pattern of consumption that is being created for modern African society. These practices have not only been absorbed from television programs, such as films and TV series, but have also been observed in the most diverse advertising spots, including those promoting unhealthy products, which are often displayed at sporting events, on the streets, in supermarket brochures, newspapers, and on the radio.

The paradigm shift mentioned above has led to health issues related to weight gain, obesity, high blood pressure, and other metabolic disorders (see Figure 1), posing a risk for the development of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) [3, 4]. These diseases have the potential to negatively impact the health of the most illiterate and poorest people, causing disability and premature mortality. Which, in turn, would be capable of amplifying even more the barriers to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda [5].

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 delineates the mechanisms through which commercial determinants of health (CDoH) operate within the African context. At its base lie the driving forces, represented by transnational corporations in the food, alcohol, and tobacco industries, whose economic power is amplified through global trade, investment, and supply chains. These actors exert influence through lobbying strategies that shape political, social, and cultural environments, often undermining regulatory initiatives and securing policies that prioritize commercial expansion over public health interests. Their reach is further extended through diverse channels of influence, including mass advertising, sponsorship of cultural and sporting events, the strategic use of media and digital platforms, and pervasive marketing campaigns, all of which contribute to the normalization of unhealthy consumption patterns.

**Figure 1.** The working mechanism of commercial determinants adapted from Kickbusch et al., [2].



The cumulative effect of these processes is the ongoing nutrition transition, characterised by a displacement of traditional dietary practices by ultra-processed foods rich in sugar, salt, and saturated fats, thereby fuelling a rising prevalence of anaemia, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Confronting these trajectories requires strengthening supervisory mechanisms, encompassing good governance, equity-oriented policymaking, advancing health literacy, and empowering communities, with the predominant aim of creating environments that enable healthier choices and generate sustainable health benefits.

The increase in non-communicable diseases is a manifestation of a global economic system that paradoxically prioritizes wealth creation over consumer health, and this applies to Africa as well [2]. Corporate power is expanded as more people are reached through the various channels, and their consumption choices are increasingly conditioned [6]. This produces an illusion of freedom of commercial choice, which is determined by the multinationals who run the hypermarkets, making available for sale the products of their interest [6]. The CDoH represents a set of strategies used by the private

sector to promote unhealthy products and choices. These determinants are a consequence of unsustainable economic models [7] and systematically alter the lifestyles of people and communities on a large scale by undermining choice and producing the "industrial epidemics of the 21st century" [8].

The control of their effects on the population must be implemented in a structural and concerted manner between governments and various stakeholders. It is also essential that multinational companies responsible for the manufacture and massive distribution of these harmful products to human health be made aware of the consequences of consuming these products. There should be a sense of concern about the rapid expansion of large multinational corporations promoting unhealthy foods into emerging markets such as Africa, where they have been expanding since the late 20th century, perhaps because of low awareness, low regulation, low health literacy and because they contain a younger population [9, 10].

### 3. Contribution to Health Promotion

In conclusion, the widespread marketing of foods and drinks rich in sugar, salt, and saturated fats is driving what may be described as an "industrial epidemic" across Africa. This trend is not simply the outcome of personal lifestyle choices; it is essentially the product of calculated strategies adopted by powerful corporations that expand into markets with limited regulation, low levels of health literacy, and high social vulnerability. The result has been a rapid nutritional transition, with profound implications for population health and the sustainability of health systems. Confronting these forces requires acknowledging that structural determinants, rather than individual responsibility alone, are at the core of this challenge.

Reversing these trajectories will demand stronger political will and coordinated action. Governments must reinforce regulation of the food and beverage sector through fiscal policies and restrictions on advertising that target children and young people. At the same time, embedding health literacy into school curricula and national health strategies is vital to empower communities with the knowledge and skills needed to resist commercial pressures. Equally important is the creation of mechanisms that ensure accountability, fostering collaboration among governments, civil society, and public health institutions to hold multinational corporations accountable for the health impacts of their products. Such measures are essential to protect younger generations, reduce avoidable mortality, and restore health as a foundation for Africa's social and economic development.

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