

15th November 2023

Unpacking advocacy strategies in the commercial determinants of health

Roundtable Discussion Report



ARCHE | Australian Research Centre for Health Equity
*Generating and mobilising knowledge for governing a
healthier and fairer society*



**Australian
National
University**

The Roundtable

Public health scholarship has uncovered a wide range of strategies used by the alcohol and ultra-processed food industries to promote their products and influence regulation. This has included lobbying and political donations, partnering with governments, engaging in multistakeholder platforms, funding research biased in favour of industry, co-opting health professionals and policymakers and undermining legitimate science. Less is known about the strategies used by non-government organisations to positively influence these health-harming commercial practices in Australia and internationally.

On 15th November 2023, the Australian Research Centre for Health Equity (ARCHE) at the ANU School of Regulation and Global Governance held a national roundtable on unpacking health advocacy strategies in the commercial determinants of health. The roundtable comprised a mix of leading public health, medication, nutrition, alcohol, NCD-focused and social justice organisations and academics from diverse disciplines with a strong interest in the regulation of alcohol and ultra-processed foods industries.

The roundtable centred on two key questions: How can health advocates influence the activities of harmful commodity industries? How are NGOs across Australia and internationally managing their interactions with commercial actors? Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, this was a closed event according to Chatham House rule.

Academic researchers presented findings from an ARC Linkage research project that has analysed strategies used by organisations in Australia and internationally.

Participants discussed the barriers and opportunities to working across disease and risk factor siloes, assessed the lessons for enabling influence in alcohol and ultra-processed food industries, and explored international good practice on managing engagement with commercial actors.



Influencing alcohol and ultra-processed food industries

The roundtable focused on alcohol and ultra-processed food industries, with tobacco, vaping, and gambling providing an important backdrop as key commercial sectors for many of the organisations.

Harmful commodity industries, including alcohol, highly processed food and tobacco, shape the noncommunicable disease (NCD) crisis in Australia and globally through their practices which make their products readily accessible, available and desirable for human consumption.

Research has shown that commercial actors have influenced regulation to their benefit, and that industry self-regulation has failed to stem the health and economic crises of early disability and death arising from these products.

Recent calls for a 'public health playbook' point to the need for public health actors to develop a suite of strategies to counter commercial power and influence.

Lessons for influence

Dr Belinda Townsend (ANU) presented findings from an ongoing ARC Linkage project examining strategies used by NGOs to influence the commercial determinants of health. The findings included a matrix of 18 'inside' and 'outside' strategies used by NGOs internationally, identified from a review of scholarly literature in the commercial determinants of health (Figure 1).

Drawing on 30 interviews with CEOs and senior policy directors from Australian NGOs, Dr Townsend presented the range of strategies currently used by NGOs in the alcohol and ultra-processed food sectors, perceptions by those NGOs of their effectiveness, and the suite of conditions that enable NGOs to influence commercial actors directly or via pressuring government to regulate. Key take aways include the strength of working in coalitions, including organisations outside health and the voices of lived experience, and sequencing strategies to leverage power.

Participants reflected on the different resources available to NGOs, including based on their membership and organisation objectives, which inform strategies taken. Participants also reflected on the need to move beyond the Ministry of Health when targeting government, and stressed the evolving nature of advocacy strategies. Participants reflected on the 'grey area' of engagement beyond transnational corporations and the need to



develop risk matrices and share lessons learnt internally within the NGO community in Australia.

Managing engagement: international practice

The second part of the day focused on lessons from international practice on managing engagement with commercial actors. Professor Jeff Collin (University of Edinburgh) shared high level insights on recent developments at the World Health Organization and in global NGOs like NCD Alliance in managing engagement to prevent conflict of interest (COI) and undue influence of commercial actors on policy, regulation and decision making.

The effective management of conflict of interest, broadly understood as the potential for an actor's vested interest to unduly influence the independence, objectivity or actions regarding a primary interest, such as government regulation, is not yet well understood in health governance.

Prof Collin presented the WHO nutrition tool and recent work by NCD Alliance on internal NGO policies for managing conflict of interest. Key take aways include developing internal risk processes and mechanisms to assess potential COI.

Figure 1: NGO strategies in the commercial determinants of health

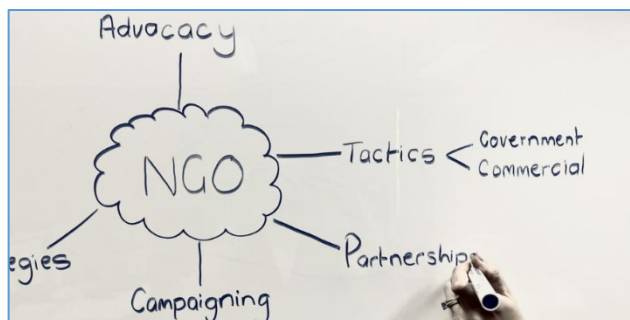
	Target: Commercial actor	Target: Government / Intergovernmental
Inside strategies	→ Forming partnerships and multistakeholder initiatives → Holding private meetings and roundtables → Engaging with company annual general meetings and shareholders → Collaborating other than a partnership; including via the participation in the development of industry standards, reports, CSR initiatives → Pursuing litigation directly against industry	→ Lobbying; including via formal consultation processes (e.g. submissions), serving on committees and in delegations, and informal interactions with policymakers → Drafting legislation, policies and standards; including co-producing reports → Providing technical support and training; including funding government activities and taking on implementation roles → Pursuing litigation against government
Outside strategies	→ Monitoring and reporting on commercial practises; including developing 'counter accounts' to debunk industry claims, calling out industry funded groups, 'naming and shaming' in mainstream media and social media campaigns → Protests at industry sites → Boycotts → Directly engaging with the public in campaigns, including mass letterboxing and coordinating mass petitions → Creative use of alternative spaces; including via public documentaries of corporate activities	→ Protests and public campaigning calling for regulation; including via mainstream media and social media → Monitoring and reporting, including monitoring government compliance with international treaties and generating evidence for monitoring → Forum shifting debate from one policy forum to another – vertically within government and horizontally to the global level → Proposing and initiating alternative sources of economic development

Townsend, B., Johnson, T., Ralston, R., Cullerton, K., Martin, J., Baum, F., Arnanz, L., Holmes, R & Friel, S. (2023). [A framework of NGO inside and outside strategies in the commercial determinants of health: findings from a narrative review](#), *Globalization and Health*, 19, 74.

Next Steps

A number of potential next steps were discussed, including:

- Sharing resources on decision matrices or risk assessments regarding how organisations manage potential engagements with a range of commercial actors
- Activities to enable a focus on advocacy strategies in the wider public health community
- Identifying opportunities for advocacy literacy and training within the academic workforce
- Supporting governments to prioritise evidence based public health regulation
- Building the wider network of public health associations and policy influencers and making use of wider connections
- Pooling resources and sharing information
- Exploring spaces for further collaboration including through conferences, online webinars, case studies, and resources.



In summary

The Roundtable provided a day for sharing insights between research and policy and practice for national non-government organisations and associations and researchers active in public health in Australia. It focused on advocacy strategies for influence in the commercial determinants of health and in particular for alcohol and ultra-processed food sectors. Participants explored the different ways of working, the challenges and opportunities for influence, and the grey areas regarding commercial actor interactions, as well as the need to manage conflict of interest.

The roundtable was an initiative of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project titled 'Understanding engagement to regulate the commercial determinants of health'. The project is a collaboration between The Australian Research Centre for Health Equity (ARCHE) at the Australian National University, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), Food for Health Alliance (formerly Obesity Policy Coalition), NCD Alliance, University of Edinburgh, Adelaide University and the University of Queensland.



Participants

Anita Dessaix, Cancer Council NSW

Dr Belinda Townsend, Australian National University

Bonnie Matheson, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

Caterina Giorgi, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education

Charli Peasley, WANADA Australia

Clare Sullivan, National Heart Foundation Australia

Dr Gemma Crawford, Australian Health Promotion Association & Curtin University

Giorgia Dalla Libera Marchiori, Australian National University

Jane Martin, Food for Health Alliance

Professor Jeff Collin, University of Edinburgh

Dr Jenny Goodare, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education

Joanne Graham-Smith, Healthway WA

Julie Flanagan, National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Dr Kathrin Lauber, University of Edinburgh

Lucy Westerman, Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance

Dr Mark Zirnsak, Uniting Church in Australia

Megan Varlow, Cancer Council Australia

Melinda Edmunds, Australian Health Promotion Association

Robert Taylor, Alcohol and Drug Foundation

Sally Warner, Cancer Council South Australia

Professor Sharon Friel, Australian National University

Adj Prof Terry Slevin, Public Health Association of Australia

Timothy Molineux, Uniting Church in Australia

Walter Johnson, Australian National University

CONTACT

Dr Bel Townsend, ANU
belinda.townsend.anu.edu.au
@BelTownsend

Prof Sharon Friel, ANU
sharon.friel@anu.edu.au
@SharonfrielOz



Australian
National
University



ARCHE | Australian Research Centre for Health Equity
*Generating and mobilising knowledge for governing a healthier
and fairer society*