



**PMAC** | PRINCE MAHIDOL  
AWARD CONFERENCE **2024**

## **PS2.1**

**HOW GEOPOLITICS OF COMMERCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH CAN  
INFLUENCE THE IMPACTS OF FOOD, BEVERAGES AND AGRICULTURE  
INDUSTRY ON HEALTH**

## | BACKGROUND

The world is facing a range of geopolitical tensions and challenges driven by many factors that include protracted conflicts and wars in various regions of the world (e.g., Somalia, Sudan, Central African Republic, West Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America), the newly erupted Russia-Ukraine war; the ongoing Covid pandemic, trade wars between countries and regions, and the climate crisis. These have caused economic disparity, rise in poverty and disease, migration and refugee crisis, upsurge in food and nutrition insecurity, socio-political instability and increasing trend towards protectionist trade policies between countries and regional economic unions. Many of these geopolitical factors are directly or indirectly linked to the commercial determinants of health (CDOH) such as food, beverage and agriculture industry and have a significant influence on their impacts on human and planetary health.

For example, the geopolitics of the agriculture industry can have an impact on the nutritional quality of food, and a broader negative effect on the ecosystem. Many countries have policies and practices that provide subsidies and favour a particular type of crop. The USA heavily subsidizes corn production, which has led to decrease in prices of corn-based products such as fructose corn syrup and other derivatives, and increase in corn-based sugary drinks, ultra-processed foods, and production of corn-based animal feed stimulating thriving livestock farming on industrial scale. Production and consumption of these foods, feeds and drinks have significantly damaged the environment, and have led to higher incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, heart attacks and cancer. Large swathes of land cultivated with these monocrops have resulted in loss of nutrients in soil, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, and reduced agriculture productivity.

Similarly, free trade agreements between countries and regional organizations can increase the availability of processed and unhealthy food products as was the case with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that eliminated tariffs on high fructose corn syrup, contributing to the increased consumption of sugary drinks in Mexico. Similar trade agreements exist in many regions including Europe, Africa and Asia influencing the public health impacts of CDOH.

Regulations related to food and beverage industry are also very often shaped by geopolitical forces, and vary significantly between countries and regions. The food, beverage and agriculture sectors may strongly lobby governments to prevent regulations that could limit their profits, such as taxes on sugary drinks or restrictions on marketing to children. For example, in 2016, the soda industry spent over \$30 million to defeat a soda tax proposal in California. Conversely, some countries may have stricter regulations on food advertising to children or require clearer labeling of ingredients, which can help consumers make more informed choices about what they eat.

In recent times many foreign investors, including governments have used their geopolitical clout and financial advantage to acquire large stretches of land leading to displacement of small farmers and shift towards monoculture depleting local biodiversity and reducing availability of locally grown traditional foods.

There are also other geopolitical factors that influence directly or indirectly through bilateral development aid or multi-lateral funding of countries and international agencies (e.g., FAO, WHO, WTO), respectively leading to shifts in food production and food safety standards impacting CDOH impacts on human health.

Thus, it is important to recognize that the influence of geopolitics on CDOH impacts is complex and multifaceted, and it can vary across countries and regions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective public health policies that prioritize the promotion of healthy and sustainable food systems.

### **The problem**

Unfortunately, most of the geopolitical factors lead the food, beverage and agriculture industry to generate products that aggravate the harm they already cause to human and planetary health. In the constantly evolving multi-polar world of today where new political and trade alliances are being formed and old ones dismantled, geopolitics of CDOH and its impacts on food, beverage and agriculture industry are becoming incredibly complex, multi-faceted and unpredictable. For example, the political and economic axis is increasingly shifting towards the East, with China, India, and Southeast Asia becoming important global political and economic players. Africa is experiencing fast economic growth, and is increasingly becoming assertive recognizing its potential geopolitical power. Through the African Union, a robust socio-economic and political alliance of all the African countries on the continent, 55 countries have developed their own free trade agreement and are now increasingly developing collective capacity to negotiate and choose its partners and collaborators that benefit the peoples of Africa. All of these changes have significant sway on the food, beverage and agriculture industry impacts on health

Under these evolving geopolitical scenario, the main challenge is how to develop a framework for international governance of food, beverage and agriculture industry, and implement broad policies with oversight from international and regional bodies that are robust and resilient enough to withstand the ever-changing geopolitical dynamic, and contribute to mitigating the negative impacts of the CDOH on public and planetary health.

To address this issue, the session will support the continuation of the dialogue on how the global community can progressively engage with the key players to minimize the negative impacts of geopolitics of CDOH. The multi-dimensional nature of the geopolitics of CDOH influence on health impacts necessitates engagement with a range of stakeholders. Thus, this session will bring a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral group together including those representing governments, the private sector, international agencies, regional economic organizations, development partners, research institutes and academia, farmers and consumer associations to address the following issues.

## | OBJECTIVES

- Review existing key policies, international frameworks, national and regional regulations and compliance mechanisms for commercial entities to reduce health damaging practices.
- Review existing divergent policy and regulatory frameworks in various geographies and polities, and understand how they are developed and implemented, and constrain the food, beverage and agriculture industry, leading to inefficiencies and barriers to entry.
- Identify ways of adopting the harmonized policy and regulations based on already well-developed food and beverage standards by international agencies such as WTO, FAO and WHO, to help reduce trade barriers and facilitate the production and distribution of healthy food products.
- Given the fact that geopolitical considerations can often influence the formulation and implementation of public health policies, support development of evidence-based policies on nutrition, labeling, advertising and food safety to ensure public health concerns over-ride commercial interests.
- Understand the complex interplay between geopolitics and economics of the CDOH and how it influences the impacts of the food, beverage and agriculture industry on public health and environment.
- Identify ways by which fair trade practices can be promoted, and trade barriers can be reduced, to ensure equitable access to markets for all countries given the importance of the influence of geopolitics on availability, affordability and quality of food.
- Identify ways to promote sustainable agriculture and balanced, healthy diets globally. Related to this, in countries and regions confronting conflicts and political instability, identify how sustainable farming practices can be promoted through assisting small-scale farmers, developing agriculture infrastructure and technology, and reducing food waste.
- Identify incentives for the multi-national food and beverage industry to promote transparency, responsible conduct of business and develop regulatory market practices targeted to benefit vulnerable populations.
- Develop ways to encourage cooperation, dialogue, and knowledge-sharing among countries, international organizations, and stakeholders to reduce the negative influence of geopolitics on the industry.
- Define effective mechanisms and practices to enhancing consumer awareness and education about healthy food choices and the impact of geopolitics of CDOH promoting nutritional literacy, encouraging sustainable consumption patterns, and empowering consumers to make informed decisions about their food and beverage choices. Identify best case scenarios and examples from the industry that has benefited consumers and how these can be replicated and scaled up in regions and countries



Keynote / Panelist

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