

Health experts call for bold action to prioritize health over profit

March 23 2023

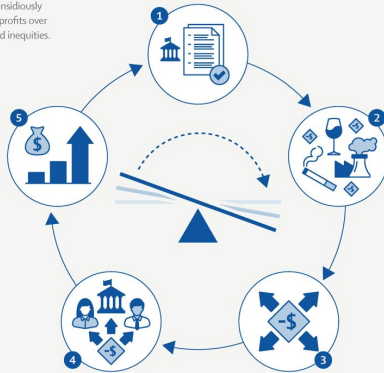
Rebalancing global power asymmetries to substantially improve human and planetary health

Although commercial entities can contribute positively to health and society, the products and practices of some commercial actors are responsible for escalating rates of avoidable ill health, planetary damage, and social and health inequity.

Tipping the balance

A cycle of behaviour by commercial actors and policy makers has insidiously tipped the balance of power increasingly in favour of commercial profits over several decades, which has perpetuated poor health outcomes and inequities.

- 1 Commercial actors use their wealth and power to **shape regulations and policies in their own interests.**
- 2 Favourable policies stimulate increased sales — and thus consumption — of harmful commercial products, which **compounds the harm and cost burden they cause.**
- 3 Favourable policies also **enable commercial entities to externalise the costs of harm** caused by the production, consumption, and disposal of their products.
- 4 Externalised costs (eg, paying to treat non-communicable diseases caused by commercial products) are **largely met by the states and individuals affected.** These costs reduce the resources available to states and individuals to pay for medicines, health care, food, and housing, **leaving health systems increasingly unable to cope.**
- 5 Meanwhile, commercial entities enjoy **excess profits, fuelling a growing power imbalance** between commercial actors and governments who should hold them to account.



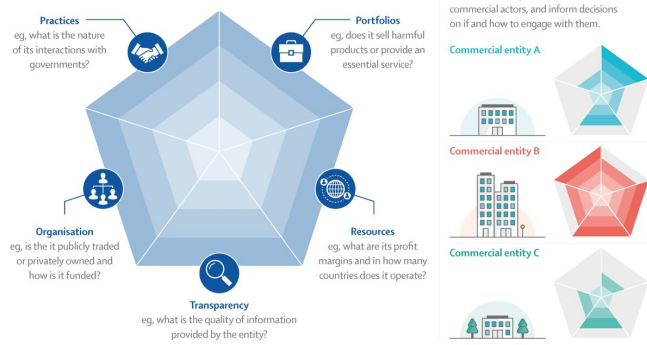
The model of the commercial determinants of health

Understand the full model by reading the full Lancet series at: [thelancet.com/series/commercial-determinants-health](https://www.thelancet.com/series/commercial-determinants-health)

However, the commercial world is diverse and not all commercial entities are harmful to health in the same way or to the same degree. The first step towards shifting the balance of power away from commercial interests is to understand this diversity.

Measuring commercial diversity

Meaningful distinctions between commercial entities based on the nature of their effects on health can be made by considering five factors:

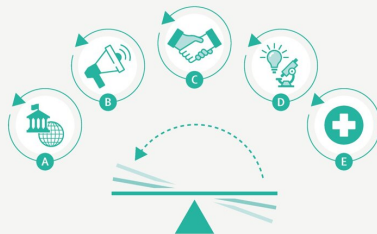


This framework of thinking can help policy makers and other stakeholders make direct comparisons between commercial actors, and inform decisions on if and how to engage with them.

Addressing commercial determinants of health and health inequities requires a global rebalancing of power that prioritises public interests over commercial profit and challenges contemporary capitalism to increase its compatibility with health and health equity.

Prioritising public interests over commercial profit

Rebalancing this power dynamic requires coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholder groups:



- A **States and international organisations** can change policy systems and incentivise investment in business models that are essential for health equity, and sustainability.
- B **Civil society groups** should raise their collective voice, articulate alternative visions, and hold commercial actors and governments accountable.
- C **Commercial actors** must end opposition to new public health regulation, respect and comply with existing regulations, and implement regenerative business models.
- D **Academia and researchers** should provide evidence that is fit for purpose and presented in the right way, at the right time, and to the right audiences.
- E **Health actors** can break with the hegemony of a biomedical model of health and engage more broadly (eg, with influential trade and finance actors).



The question is not whether the world has the resources or will to take such actions, but whether humanity can survive if we fail to make this effort.



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Although commercial entities can contribute positively to health and society, the products and practices of some commercial actors are responsible for escalating rates of avoidable ill health, planetary damage, and social and health inequity.

Credit: *The Lancet*

A new Series published in *The Lancet* describes how, although commercial entities can contribute positively to health and society, the products and practices of some commercial actors are responsible for escalating rates of avoidable ill health, planetary damage, and social and health inequity. Authors make key recommendations to ensure that contemporary capitalism is compatible with good population health.

The industries that produce just four harmful products—tobacco, alcohol, unhealthy food, and [fossil fuels](#)—account for at least a third of global deaths, illustrating the scale and huge economic cost of the problem.

Professor Rob Moodie, Series Lead and Professor of Public Health Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, says, "We all want to be part of a society that's safe, happy and healthy but this will only happen when governments make the health of people and the planet a higher priority than profit. This series isn't anti-business, it's pro-health. It's important that we acknowledge that many businesses play vital roles in society, but we also need to recognize the practices and products of some are making people and the environment sick."

He adds, "With the rise of non-communicable diseases such as [heart disease](#), cancer and diabetes and the escalating climate crisis, [urgent](#)

[action](#) is needed to address the way businesses contribute to these problems, and in particular, industries that sell harmful products."

Outlining a cycle of how commercial actors can harm health, they describe the following steps:

1. Commercial actors use their wealth and power to shape regulations and policies in their own interests.
2. Favorable policies stimulate increased sales—and thus consumption—of harmful commercial products, which compounds the harm and cost burden they cause.
3. Favorable policies also enable commercial entities to externalize the costs of harm caused by the production, consumption, and disposal of their products.
4. Externalized costs (eg, paying to treat [non-communicable diseases](#) caused by commercial products) are largely met by the states and individuals affected. These costs reduce the resources available to states and individuals to pay for medicines, [health care](#), food, and housing, leaving [health systems](#) increasingly unable to cope.
5. Meanwhile, [commercial entities](#) enjoy excess profits, fueling a growing power imbalance between commercial actors and governments who should hold them to account.

The authors argue that a cycle of behavior by commercial actors and [policy makers](#) has insidiously tipped the balance of power increasingly in favor of commercial profits over several decades, which has perpetuated poor health outcomes and inequities. To restore this balance and ensure that contemporary capitalism is compatible with good population health, the authors make key recommendations.

Among these, they call on governments to legislate higher standards for marketing of harmful products, including honest product labeling and

protections for people from predatory marketing tactics including via [social media](#). Additionally, they ask businesses to commit to ending lobbying against pro-health policies, including using third parties such as fake grassroots (astroturf) organizations and think tanks to push political agendas. Furthermore, authors congratulate commercial actors and investors who are increasingly adopting alternative financing models that create social value, and promote positive health, social and sustainability outcomes and encourage others to follow this example.

More information: The Lancet Commercial Determinants of Health Series, *The Lancet* (2023). www.thelancet.com/series/comme...-determinants-health

Provided by Lancet

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