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## Commercial determinants of health in Nepal: Confronting corporate power to protect public health

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### Introduction

An individual's health and well-being outcomes are shaped by everyday living conditions, which in turn are influenced by the political, social and environmental contexts in which they live or work. In recent years, the concept of the Commercial Determinants of Health (CDoH) has emerged as an important framework for understanding how private sector activities affect population health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines commercial determinants of health as the systems, practices, and pathways through which commercial actors drive health outcomes, often prioritizing profit over public well-being.<sup>1</sup> These determinants include the production, marketing, and distribution of harmful products such as tobacco, alcohol, ultra-processed foods, and sugary beverages, as well as corporate influence on public policy and regulation.<sup>2-5</sup> This editorial highlights the conceptual dimension of CDoH, focuses on increasing influence in Nepal, and outlines potential strategies to address and mitigate these challenges.

### Commercial determinants of health

The commercial determinants of health refer to the strategies and approaches employed by the private sector to promote products and choices that may negatively affect health.<sup>2</sup> Historically, public health focused on social determinants such as income, education, employment, and housing condition. However, growing evidences demonstrate that corporate actors shape many of these determinants and directly influence health outcomes.<sup>4-6</sup> Industries involved in tobacco, alcohol, processed foods, fossil fuels, pharmaceuticals, and digital technologies exert substantial influence on consumer behavior and government policies.<sup>6-8</sup>

Rapid epidemiological and nutritional transitions, with non-communicable diseases now responsible for about two-thirds of all deaths.<sup>1</sup> Cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, and chronic respiratory illnesses have become major causes of mortality and disability. Urbanization, lifestyle changes, and aggressive marketing of processed foods, tobacco, and alcohol are reshaping consumption patterns.



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Traditional diets are increasingly replaced by packaged foods high in salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats.<sup>5</sup> This shift has contributed to rising rates of obesity, hypertension, and diabetes across the population. The nutrition transition, from home-grown organic food to mass-produced, industrially processed food products, has been evident in low and middle-income countries (LMICs).<sup>6</sup> This has led to an increase in consumption of high sugar, salt, and trans-fat, and has contributed to obesity and metabolic disorders. The sales of sugar-sweetened beverages have increased. Availability of cheap, unhealthy items in the LMICs such as loose cigarettes, cheap liquor, uncertified contaminated food and vegetables, and cheap, unhealthy imitated food products, is driving up non-communicable diseases among the poor, rural, and less informed population.<sup>5</sup>

### Situation of Nepal

Nepal is increasingly affected by commercial determinants of health, driven by corporations, market liberalization, and widespread commercialization. Studies show that the alcohol industry exploits policy gaps.<sup>8</sup> Despite these concerns, public awareness and civil society engagement on harmful commercial practices remain limited, and structural drivers such as urbanization and expanding markets are often overlooked. Current non-communicable disease policies focus mainly on individual behaviors, pay little attention to commercial forces, and lack robust data and monitoring to guide effective interventions.

The growing commercialization of healthcare presents both opportunities and challenges for Nepal. Private healthcare facilities have expanded rapidly, increasing access to diagnostic and treatment services. However, profit-driven healthcare delivery contributing to inequities, unnecessary procedures, irrational prescribing, and increased out-of-pocket expenditures. The pharmaceutical industry also represents a significant commercial determinant of health. Aggressive marketing practices and conflicts of interest may influence prescribing behavior and healthcare expenditures.<sup>9</sup>

Digital technologies have transformed commercial marketing strategies. Social media platforms, targeted advertising, influencer marketing, and algorithm-driven content enable corporations to reach consumers more effectively than ever before.<sup>8</sup> Packaged foods high in salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats of commercially manufactured products have replaced traditional diets rich in grains, vegetables, and minerals. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to digital marketing of unhealthy foods, beverages, tobacco alternatives, and alcohol products. Several governance challenges limit Nepal's ability to effectively address commercial determinants

of health. Weak regulatory enforcement, conflicts of interest, insufficient intersectoral coordination and collaboration, and limited public awareness undermine public health efforts. Policymakers have not been able to balance economic development objectives with health protection, often in the context of globalization and market liberalization.

### Conclusion and way forward

Commercial determinants of health have emerged as powerful drivers of disease, inequity, and health system challenges worldwide. In Nepal, the growing influence of tobacco, alcohol, ultra-processed food industries, environmental pollution, healthcare commercialization, and digital marketing contributes significantly to the burden of non-communicable diseases and other health problems. These challenges cannot be addressed simply by educating individuals about healthier choices, but by creating social, economic, and policy environments that make healthy choices possible. Protecting public health requires more than treating disease; it requires addressing the commercial system that helps produce it. Addressing these challenges requires strong governance, multisectoral collaboration, robust regulatory frameworks, and sustained political commitment to prioritize public health over commercial interests. Thus, public health cannot advance without addressing the commercial determinants of health, which strongly influence non-communicable diseases. Governments, private sector, civil society and academia must collaborate and invest in health equity, ensuring that human and planetary well-being are prioritized over profit.

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