



Calls for the Olympics to end harmful Coca-Cola sponsorship

A campaign by activists and health experts describe the partnership as “a master class in sportswashing”. Paul Webster reports.

Calls from public health advocates are mounting for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to terminate its marketing and sponsorship with the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Company, the world’s largest beverage manufacturer and distributor.

Regular consumption of sweetened beverages, such as Coca-Cola, is associated with increased risks for health problems throughout life, including overweight and obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, says Trish Cotter, an Australian food policy activist who co-leads the Kick Big Soda out of Sport campaign, which launched shortly before the Paris Olympics started in late July.

In the face of the growing evidence that its sugary products cause harm, Coca-Cola’s partnership with the IOC is “a master class in sportswashing” to burnish its reputation and market products to billions of sports lovers—many of whom are children—worldwide, says the Kick Big Soda out of Sport campaign. “It’s time for athletes to step up and tell IOC they want it to reconsider their cosy relationship with sugary beverage products that cause health harm”, Cotter says.

For evidence of Coca-Cola’s “amazing promotional efforts” throughout the Olympics, Cotter points to this year’s official Olympic song, Hello World. According to the IOC, the song “marks a historic moment in Coca-Cola’s 96-year relationship with the Olympic Movement, making it the first time the two have collaborated on a song together as a way of inspiring ‘everyday greatness among athletes and fans around the world’ for now and years to come”.

Cotter notes that the video version of the song, which features superstar singers Anderson.Paak and

Gwen Stefani standing on a stage emblazoned with the Coca-Cola logo, is intercut with images of numerous athletes. “By bringing the Olympians into the video”, says Cotter, “the athletes may be unwittingly providing tacit endorsements of Coca-Cola.”

So far, says Cotter, 72 organisations from 20 countries—including the World Cancer Research Fund International, World Obesity Federation, and the World Public Health Nutrition Association—have joined the Kick Big Soda out of Sport campaign, which describes the IOC’s relationship with Coca-Cola as “a profit-driven marriage of convenience” in which “the allure of sports is a pretext for exposing millions of children to unhealthy products”.

Coca-Cola did not respond to an interview request from *The Lancet*. However, IOC officials told *The Lancet* that the Coca-Cola Company has a global Responsible Marketing Policy that stresses “not marketing any of its products to children under the age of 13 and in media where 30% or more of the audience is composed of children under 13”. Through its policies and practices, IOC added, Coca-Cola “is taking a responsible approach to supporting athletes, their families, the fans and others who take part in the Olympic & Paralympic Games Paris 2024”.

In a keynote address at the 77th World Health Assembly of the WHO in Geneva, Thomas Bach, IOC President, stressed that, for obesity, cardiovascular predispositions, and other non-communicable diseases, “sport is an excellent tool for prevention”.

Barry Popkin, founder and co-director of the Global Food Research Program at the University of North

Carolina, notes that sugary drinks are overwhelmingly implicated in a global explosion of health harms, including 13 types of cancer. “Sugar is a rogue ingredient”, he insists. “It’s the tobacco of diet.”

Popkin, who is among the founders of the Kick Big Soda out of Sport campaign, says he thinks that efforts to get the IOC to back away from Coca-Cola will require sustained support and will be drawn out over a considerably long timeframe. “Coca-Cola has historically given money to many organisations and tried to dilute their voices”, Popkin added, while explaining that the company’s approach to managing bad publicity about the harms of its sugary products—some of which are laced with caffeine, an addictive substance—draws from classic corporate strategies refined long ago by tobacco companies.

The adoption of special taxes on sugary drinks by 58 countries suggests consciousness of the need to curb consumption is growing, says Popkin. A recent WHO report on commercial determinants on non-communicable diseases in Europe spotlighted Estonia’s experience introducing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) and notes that the sugary beverage industry employed an array of tactics including “naming and discrediting specific health partners, such as the WHO Country Office in Estonia”.

The industry “also attempted to divert attention away from the role of SSBs in NCDs to other factors, such as physical inactivity, and claimed that the tax had not worked in other countries, citing increasing obesity rates”, WHO reported.

Paul Webster

For the WHO report on commercial determinants of health see <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/376957>