Amid municipal campaigns, the theme of public health reappears in the discussions and promises of most candidates. Surveys indicate that the topic is amongst the main problems populations are facing and it is not a coincidence that it occupies a significant place in candidates’ government plans. It is widely accepted in all sectors of society that the best and most sustainable solutions for public problems come from a consensus of all stakeholders. However, the dialogue between the public and private sectors has deteriorated in recent years, particularly with regard to the global pandemic of obesity and other noncommunicable diseases.

Since the discovery of deficiencies of vitamins and minerals to the present day, the private sector has been playing an important role in combating these problems. The industry joined the fortification of staple foods such as salt in early 1920 and wheat flour in the 40s. More recently, the food industry has responded to the call made by the World Health Organization (WHO) through its Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, through the reformulation of foods to reduce sugar, salt, saturated fat and trans fatty acids. The industry developed technologies that allowed food fortification. From precise dosing and mixing equipment to complex extrusion systems that allowed the nutritional improvement of food, today it is possible to fortify demanding food systems, such as rice, UHT milk and drinks and even cereal of different shapes and sizes.

It is necessary, however, to define what kind of alliance is necessary and what are the qualitative metrics for these alliances. It is not enough to only call for dialogue. The desired result, the specific role and weight of each actor must be defined in advance. If nutrient deficiency persists and obesity is high, the obvious conclusion is that the food industry needs to develop products with more nutrients and fewer calories. This is a technological development that should engage industry, while communicating with the consumer must follow the same course with regard to the nutritional quality of food. The private sector must comply with the restrictions and threats that arise during the journey from the field to the table. Rising food prices, deforestation, water usage, carbon footprint and global warming are issues that have to be addressed urgently and need clear rules, agreed sanctions and incentives in public-private partnerships. The public sector must always be vigilant with regard to food safety and communication of the truth to consumers. The private sector can further contribute by expanding the communication of better eating habits, and making healthier and more nutritious food.

It’s definitely not incumbent upon the private sector to establish policies for better nutrition and healthier eating. This is clearly the role of the public sector, with the aid of scientific knowledge provided by academics. However, this should not prevent the industry from participating in this dialogue, as it has already done, and developing technologies, communication and distribution channels, financing, applied research and many other instruments that allowed it in the past to contribute to public health and to place it securely in a position to continue contributing in the future.

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