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Quito - Ecuador

cc: National Secretaries, Coordinating Ministers, Ministries, Dr Margaret Chan (WHO), Dr Carissa F. Etienne (PAHO)

31 August 2016

Dear President Correa,

As international organisations working to promote public health and reduce NCDs, overweight & obesity, we are greatly concerned to have received news that the Ministry for Industry and Productivity of Ecuador proposes to modify the current processed food and soft drink labelling system (in force since August 2014), and prioritize the interests of companies that produce such products over public health objectives.

Ecuador has been a pioneer and a model for other countries in the region and the world with regard to regulatory measures. It has been widely acknowledged that the current traffic light labelling system gives clear information to consumers and encourages the food industry to reformulate some of its products or withdraw them from the market because of their unhealthy content. This was highlighted by a recent study promoted by the Ministry for Public Health and undertaken by a prestigious university with the support of the Pan American Health Organization and UNICEF¹.

It is well known that the processed food and soft drink industry puts pressure on governments that have made progress (or seek to make progress) in combating NCDs using regulatory measures that inform the population and discourage the consumption of these harmful products. In this regard, we urge you to give priority to the obligations of the State to protect the health of the population of Ecuador, which we believe will be adversely affected by the proposed change in labelling by the Ministry of Industry and Productivity. This proposal has not included the Ministry for Health, which is the governing body in this matter. As such, the Ministry of Health must lead on any modification or change to the current labelling system.

Ecuador's comprehensive policy interventions help to prevent overweight and obesity (which are linked to heart disease, cancer and diabetes, among other diseases), as well as malnutrition and anaemia. Furthermore, it promotes adequate childhood growth and development.

There is currently no doubt, given the huge amount of scientific evidence, that the epidemic increase in overweight and obesity in Ecuador is closely linked to the high consumption of processed foods and soft drinks. There is also strong evidence outlining the most effective public policy measures to combat this serious public health issue, which represents a huge economic cost. Based on this evidence, Health Ministers in Latin America approved the regional 'Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents'. This Plan highlights labelling as one of the measures to be implemented to provide adequate information to consumers to protect their health. Ecuador was a pioneer in the region with its labelling policy. In fact, the PAHO Plan recognises this in the text of the Declaration (paragraph 17, f)².

¹ Freire WB, Waters WF, Rivas-Mariño G, Nguyen T, Rivas P. Evaluación Cualitativa del Sistema de Reglamento Sanitario de Alimentos Procesados en Ecuador, aceptado para publicación en Public Health Nutrition, 2016.

² <http://www.paho.org/nutricionydesarrollo/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Plan-of-Action-for-the-Prevention-of-Obesity-in-Children-and-Adolescents.pdf>

The evidence to date demonstrates the effectiveness of these measures. We are deeply concerned that despite having demonstrated the impact of the front-of-pack traffic light labelling system to inform the population about food with high sugar, fat and sodium content and enabling them to make healthy choices, action is now being taken to convince your government to go against the evidence.

We are deeply worried about the pressure companies are placing on the government of Ecuador. A reverse in policy would set back the progress made and may also lead to public confusion and a lack of confidence in health policies. Even worse, the proposed change could disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups in Ecuador, with long-term negative health consequences.

We therefore stand in solidarity with the Healthy Latin America Coalition, who wrote to you on August 24 to ensure that the health of your population is given prime consideration. We urge you to maintain the traffic light labelling scheme as an effective tool to reduce overweight & obesity, and improve nutrition and health.

Sincerely,

