



“Be Active”: contradictions in the partnership between Fédération Internationale de Football Association and World Health Organization

“Seja Ativo”: contradições na parceria entre Federação Internacional de Futebol e Organização Mundial da Saúde

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DOI

10.12820/rbafs.31e0438i



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ABSTRACT

In 2022, the partnership between the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the “Be Active” campaign, which seeks to encourage physical activity, especially among children and adolescents. While large institutions play an important role in disseminating health initiatives, this text reflects on the contradictions regarding their commitments to health protection, which are primarily driven by economic factors. The main contradiction lies in the contrast between FIFA’s historical relationship with the unhealthy commodity industries that have sponsored its mega-events for over 50 years, and the WHO’s efforts to recommend more assertive policies to protect children and adolescents from the impacts of food marketing, as well as its support for the debate on the commercial determinants of health. The text also reflects on issues in other domains, such as ethnicity, race, and politics. Finally, based on these points of contradiction regarding the commitments of FIFA and WHO to health protection, which are primarily driven by economic prerogatives, it is worth noting, from the perspective of promoting physical activity and, consequently, health, that this partnership is unsustainable. It is recommended that the WHO distance itself from entities that, in their practices, do not prioritize health and equity.

Keywords: Health Education; World Health Organization; Conflict of interest; Soccer.

RESUMO

Da parceria entre a Federação Internacional de Futebol (FIFA) e a Organização Mundial da Saúde (OMS), em 2022, foi lançada a campanha Be Active (“Seja Ativo”), que busca incentivar a prática de atividades físicas, especialmente entre crianças e adolescentes. Mesmo que as instituições de grande porte tenham papel importante na disseminação de ações em saúde, o presente texto traz reflexões sobre as contradições quanto aos seus compromissos com a proteção à saúde, que são motivadas, sobretudo, por aspectos econômicos. A principal delas está no contraste entre as relações históricas entre a FIFA e as indústrias de commodities insalubres, que patrocinam seus megaeventos há mais de 50 anos e os esforços da OMS em recomendar a formulação de políticas mais assertivas para proteger crianças e adolescentes dos impactos do marketing alimentar, bem como seu apoio ao debate sobre os determinantes comerciais da saúde. O texto também traz reflexões sobre questões de outros domínios, como o étnico-racial e o político. Por fim, a partir destes pontos de contradição quanto aos compromissos da FIFA e da OMS em relação a proteção à saúde, que são permeadas, sobretudo, por prerrogativas econômicas, cabe indicar, sob o enfoque da promoção da atividade física, e, por consequência, da saúde, que esta parceria não se sustenta, recomendando-se que a OMS se afaste de entidades que, em suas práticas, não prezam pela saúde e equidade.

Palavras-chave: Educação em saúde; Organização Mundial da Saúde; Conflito de interesses; Futebol.

From the partnership between the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in 2022, the Be Active campaign was launched with the aim of encouraging physical activity, especially among children and adolescents¹. Despite the important role of broad institutions in campaigns of this nature, this text reflects on the contradictions in their commitment to health protection,

which are motivated primarily by economic factors.

First, it is important to position football as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which involves, in addition to the sporting aspect, cultural, social, economic, and political elements². This complexity largely explains the strong influence of FIFA mega-events on a global scale, which provide excellent opportunities for disseminating messages and brands. At the 2025 FIFA Club World

Cup (CWC), held in the United States of America between June and July 2025, Be Active messages such as 'Kids need to be active for 60 minutes per day' and 'Get moving. Stay active. Play Football' were repeatedly displayed on advertising boards at all 63 matches.

However, behind the apparent concern, the partnership between FIFA-WHO is riddled with contradictions, where discourses about protecting health diverge from institutional actions due to economic issues, especially. The main one lies in the contrast between the historical relationship between FIFA and unhealthy commodity industries (e.g., whose main products cause significant damage to health, such as sugary drinks, tobacco, alcohol, and ultra-processed foods)³, which have sponsored its mega-events for over 50 years, and the WHO's efforts to recommend the formulation of more assertive policies to protect children and adolescents from the impacts of food marketing⁴.

In addition to the products of these commodity industries, which are directly associated with an increased risk of chronic diseases that constitute the greatest burden of morbidity and mortality globally and account for most premature mortality⁵, the WHO also denounces the commercial practices of these industries⁴, which increase demand and consumption of products, and thus position themselves as a significant issue in the debate on the commercial determinants of health, whose impacts can amplify health harms and inequalities at the global level³.

Contrary to the movement that culminated in the development of an policy on tobacco, which, among other advances, provides for restrictions on advertising and its consumption in football stadiums, FIFA accepts advertising from brands of sugary and alcoholic beverages, which, in turn, approach football mega-events not only with the aim of disseminating their brands on a large scale, but also for what is known as sportswashing, taking advantage of all the positive mobilization of society around the sporting phenomenon¹. Similarly, although it is not the objective of this text – but a relevant topic for future analysis – it is also worth noting the presence of betting houses at FIFA mega-events, as observed in the CWC. It is a central contradiction to allow these companies to sponsor sports that are their main objects of betting and, in addition, it is worth highlighting sports betting as a growing phenomenon that is associated with various negative health indicators⁶.

Even with the intensification of pressure from academics⁷ and social movements for FIFA to break ties

with the commodity industries, more specifically sugary and alcoholic beverages, through worldwide campaigns such as "Kick Big Soda Out," their withdrawal from mega-sporting events does not seem to be a simple task, considering the economic power that allows them to reach the high sponsorship quotas proposed by the main football entity. On the other hand, these multi-million-dollar quotas reveal another important issue related to the economic aspect, since FIFA positions itself, in its statutes, as a non-profit organization⁸.

In addition, the commodity industries also exert strong lobbying power with government decision-makers, which allows them a high degree of interference in related policies. In Brazil, for example, Bill 4,910, introduced in April 2016, which aimed to regulate the advertising of high-sugar beverages in national sporting competitions, is being revived. Subject to amendments and criticism, the bill was withdrawn by its author in August 2017. The unfavorable stance of the Brazilian Olympic Committee on Bill⁹ is an indication of the difficulty in keeping these industries away from sporting mega-events.

Besides the economic issue, the CWC also brings with it a contradiction in the anti-racist theme. Although FIFA has the No Discrimination campaign¹⁰, which culminated in the creation and adoption of anti-racist protocols, the attempt at political and economic alignment with the United States of America may have been an impediment to the dissemination of these materials in the CWC matches¹¹. And this is not a one-off alignment, since the US (in partnership with its North American counterparts, Canada and Mexico) will also host matches of the Men's World Cup in 2026. On the other hand, in the line of health protection, the WHO, by understanding that race / ethnicity constitute determinants of health, brings a strong anti-racist message about health equity¹².

And, as a final point of contradiction, the WHO's support for an institution that has a troubled history in other spheres is also questioned, such as in cases of corruption¹³ and approaches to theocratic regimes, which seek, through sportswashing, to divert attention from the number of accidents and deaths involving migrant workers, corruption, discriminatory policies against the LGBTQIA+ community and environmental damage¹⁴. The WHO has been criticized for incorporating neoliberal values, which compromise its credibility, as it ends up being, in some way, hostage to the interests of its partners, who are not always aligned with visions

and practices focused on the public welfare¹⁵.

Finally, based on these points of contradiction regarding the commitments of FIFA and the WHO in relation to health protection, which are permeated, above all, by economic prerogatives, it is worth indicating, from the perspective of promoting physical activity, and, consequently, health, that this partnership is unsustainable, and it is recommended that the WHO distance itself from entities that, in their practices, do not value health and equity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author's contributions

Guerra PH: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Investigation; Data curation; Supervision; Project administration; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Approval of the final version. Carvalho FFB e Loch MR: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Investigation; Writing – review & editing; Approval of the final version.

Declaration regarding the use of artificial intelligence tools in the article writing process

This work did not make use of generative Artificial Intelligence or AI-assisted technologies.

Availability of research data and other materials

The contents underlying the research text are contained in the manuscript.

Preprint

The manuscript was previously published as a preprint.

Server name Preprints: Scielo Preprints

Preprint Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/SciELOPreprints.12626>

Preprint publication date: 07/17/2025

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Received: 08/18/2025

Reviewed: 12/29/2025

Approved: 01/21/2026

Editor in Chief

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Cite this article as:

Guerra PH, Carvalho FFB, Loch MR. "Be Active": contradictions in the partnership between Fédération Internationale de Football Association and World Health Organization. *Rev. Bras. Ativ. Fis. Saúde.* 2026;31:e0438i. doi: 10.12820/rbafs.31e038i

Reviewers' assessment

The reviews of this article were originally conducted in Portuguese. This version has been translated using ChatGPT and subsequently reviewed by the Chief Editors.

Reviewer A

Jean Augusto Coelho Guimarães 

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- Was any indication of plagiarism observed in the manuscript?
No
- Did the authors provide clarification regarding the ethical procedures adopted for conducting the research?
Partially

Comments to the author

Dear authors,

How are you?

- The proposal of the manuscript is interesting and original. However, I believe it is necessary to reflect further on the elements presented and reconsider the objectives. Many topics were added, but I missed a logical and well-paced progression. I also felt the absence of a methodological path delimiting the theoretical essay.
- I have left some comments with the intention of supporting a critical reflection on the text and strengthening it.
- Best regards!

Comments in the text

Title:

- Line 4: I suggest reconsidering whether it is worth keeping the two acronyms FIFA and WHO or writing them in full. When convergences and divergences are mentioned, in which area or domain would these be? Throughout the manuscript it becomes clear that they relate to factors and some determinants of health. However, I believe this could already be delimited in the title.

Resumo/Abstract:

- Page 1, line 12: I suggest using the term in Portuguese and including an additional sentence to con-

ceptualize what the “Be Active” campaign is.

- Page 1, lines 12–14: The objective is broad in terms of the partnership itself between the two institutions. Throughout the manuscript, this is also reflected. I suggest reformulating the objective based on the text and on some of the relationships established between the parties. Perhaps by narrowing it down a little, the manuscript may be able to present elements that actually meet this objective.
- Page 1, line 18: I see this as a key factor of the manuscript: commercial and social determinants of health and how this is involved in the Be Active campaign, which encourages a more active and healthy lifestyle, and how this may diverge from the promotion and presence of these industries around sports environments.
- Page 1, line 19: Other aspects and other assumptions are introduced. I suggest that the objective should be more solid in its aim, methodological framework, and conclusion. As it stands, it seems somewhat vague.
- Page 1, line 20: This section also reflects the extended manuscript. I leave the authors with the following reflection: Does the text aim to address physical activity, an active and healthy lifestyle, health conditions, social or commercial determinants of health, or equity? Not that these are separate within sociocultural relationships, but in the manuscript they become mixed and somewhat confusing, and at the same time the main message the text intends to convey is not evident.

Main text

- Page 2, line 1: I suggest starting the manuscript by introducing what Be Active is.
- Page 2, line 12: I also suggest conceptualizing it and providing examples.

Final Decision

- Major revisions required