

Press Release

WHO opens the doors wide to corporate influence

68th World Health Assembly, UN Palais, Geneva
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The long-running debate about how WHO interacts with corporations is coming to crisis point. In the context of its Reform Process WHO Secretariat has been working on a new *Framework of Engagement with non-State Actors* - a term which applies equally to corporations, big philanthropies and public interest groups.

The International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN)¹ has been following this issue for many years and is calling for the negotiations to be put on hold and for the work to be informed by an expert meeting on Conflicts of Interest with public participation, with the aim of ensuring that WHO is protected from undue corporate and funder influence and stays true to its constitutional mandate.

During the discussions at regional and global level, the concerns of many Member States have not been taken seriously. African countries, for example, have stressed that “*WHO should proceed with caution in developing a policy on engagement with non-State Actors*” and specifically called for a “*clear policy on how WHO will manage its conflicts of Interest.*” In contrast the Regional Committee for Europe has been pushing for speedy adoption of the Framework.

The resulting Framework that Member States will be asked to approve this week, although claiming to address the key issues, is totally inadequate and fails to achieve the safeguards called for. Significantly the entire conflict of interest section is still in brackets (and might even be deleted) and the conflict of interest definition wrongly confuses the legal definition of conflicts of interest which refers to conflicting primary and secondary interests *within* an institution with conflicts *between* actors.

There seems to be a lack of political will to sort out this critical component of much needed comprehensive, coherent and effective public interest safeguards in the face of giant companies and private funding for public purposes. Instead the document refers frequently to the need for ‘*mutual respect*’ and ‘*trust*’ and proposes that a key principle for relations with WHO is inclusiveness of all actors.

The proposed framework would do nothing to address the corporate influence that is already being channeled by groups such as the *Global Health Council* with its 78 members from the corporate, voluntary, academic sector. This year GHC has permission to bring 101 delegates to the Assembly without any requirement to register or provide information on their credentials.² A new industry body that is eager to get official relations status with WHO is the International Food and Beverage Alliance (IFBA) representing Big Food corporations, Nestle, Ferrero, Coca Cola, Mars, McDonalds and PepsiCo.

¹ IBFAN is a 35 year-old global network of a global network of 273 groups in 168 countries that works to protect, promote and support breastfeeding and food-based complementary feeding, in realization of a child’s right to health and adequate food. www.ibfan.org

IBFAN is calling for a debate about the structural causes of the crisis in global health governance and how best to assure adequate core funding of WHO. Member States contributions. Since the US pressured for a freeze of the budgets of UN agencies in the 1990s, Member States untied funding represents only a fifth of WHO's total budget.³ If WHO is to fulfil its constitutional mandate the budget must be unfrozen. The Ebola crisis showed how prime functions of WHO have been drastically weakened by reliance on 'voluntary' funding that is tied to specific programmes with conditioned mandates. Why would it be so difficult to unfreeze when the budget is a fraction of the economic costs caused by the delayed response to the latest Ebola outbreak?⁴

Some Member States pushed WHO to open up to corporate funding at the start of the Reform process in 2010. At the time WHO Director-General, Dr Chan proposed to accept to funding from the private philanthropies and commercial sector. She promised this could be done *"without compromising independence or adding to organizational fragmentation."*⁵ In fact, it introduced a grave institutional conflict of interest. The proposed Framework now seems to deliver the payback in terms of corporate influence

It fails to deliver on demands made by Member States at the last WHA when they rejected the draft Framework: They had asked for guidance on how to discern which relationships are appropriate, and more specifically for guidance on issues related to private sector relations including conflicts of interest.⁶

If the Framework is adopted without addressing this request, any much needed budget increase may end up in the pockets of pharmaceutical transnationals while allowing Big Food to continue undermine marketing regulation of junk food which causes so much harm in terms of human health, lives and public health economies. Who would bite the hand that feeds it?

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³ <http://blogs.shu.edu/ghg/2012/12/31/improving-united-nations-funding-to-strengthen-global-health-governance-amending-the-helms-biden-agreement/>

⁴ WHO's budget represents less than one third of the Atlanta-based CDC,

⁵ Richter, J. (2012). "WHO reform and public interest safeguards: An historical perspective. Editorial." *Social Medicine* 6(3): 141-150. <http://www.socialmedicine>; <http://www.medicinasocial.info/index.php/socialmedicine/article/viewArticle/637>

⁶ IBFAN's statement on **agenda item 68/5** www.who.int