



Réseau international des groupes d'action pour l'alimentation infantile
International Baby Food Action Network - IBFAN
Red internacional de grupos pro alimentación infantil

Association Genevoise pour l'Alimentation Infantile - GIFA
Geneva Infant Feeding Association - GIFA



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Open letter to Professor Loutan, President of the Organizing Committee of the Geneva Health Forum 2010 Conference

Hundreds of leading public health experts and international scientists will be gathering soon at the Geneva Health Forum on "Globalization, crisis and health systems: confronting regional perspectives". Such international conferences are important opportunities to network and to discuss ways forward; they sometimes influence policies and practices of the future.

While the program agenda appears exciting, we note with concern the involvement of the industry, in particular Nestlé, as partners and sponsors of this Forum. We acknowledge that funding such large events at international level is a difficult venture, however we would like to express our concern with your accepting funding from corporate sponsors, in particular Nestlé, and the reasons why.

Our organization IBFAN¹ strives to ensure compliance with and implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant World Health Assembly Resolutions. Implementation of this important set of international policy instruments has been recognized by the Committee on the Rights of the Child as a concrete measure towards the realization of the child's right to the highest attainable standard of health. Currently, more than 70% countries in the world have taken legislative measures to implement the Code.

Nestlé has been violating the International Code since its adoption despite the fact that companies are asked to comply with this global public health recommendation irrespective of national legislation. Code monitoring also reveals that Nestlé operates with double standards, complying when there is strong and enforced legislation in place, yet demonstrating weak compliance where legislation and sanctions are lacking at national level. In words of the former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, Stephen Lewis *"Those who make claims about infant formula that intentionally undermine women's confidence in breastfeeding are not to be regarded as clever entrepreneurs just doing their job, but as human rights violators of the worst sort"*.

We are therefore concerned that a company with a record of human rights violations is allowed to sponsor your event and align its image with the noble causes the conference is promoting: health as a human right and Alma Ata Declaration core values.

¹ The International Baby Food Action Network is a network of more than 200 groups worldwide working to protect promote and support optimal infant and young child feeding. www.ibfan.org

We are concerned that in the globalized world of today, the frontiers between people-oriented global public health policy making and the role of industry in global health are becoming increasingly unclear, bringing about conflict of interest situations and resulting in outcomes often favoring profit rather than peoples' interests.

As a public-interest NGO, we argue that it is important for conference organizers - as well as for any organization - to develop clear and transparent criteria to assess risks and benefits of any sponsorship. Otherwise, there is the risk that under the flag of "sponsorship" companies may seek to influence policy and decision making, thus potentially damaging the image and outcomes of important gatherings such as the Geneva Health Forum. IBFAN's longstanding 30 year experience in the field of infant and young child feeding has clearly shown that industry can delay and undermine the development and implementation of effective regulations and public health policies.

Many organizations, including the International Paediatric Association IPA, UNICEF and the World Health Organization, have realized the need to develop policies on sponsorship. For example, participants in WHO meetings are asked to declare their interests in order to avoid conflicts of interest. Yet, as illustrated recently by the ongoing enquiry to assess whether or not WHO is guilty of having been unduly influenced by the pharmaceutical industry during the recent flu pandemic, even this type of measure may not be sufficient and it is therefore essential to have truly stringent policies to avoid potential problems.

We would therefore appreciate understanding what guidelines were used for selection of sponsors and what measures were taken to ensure that conflicts of interest resulting from the acceptance of corporate sponsorship do not influence adversely the Forum's scientific and policy discussions.

We would also urge the organizing committee of the Geneva Health Forum to consider the development of stringent criteria for sponsorship in the future in order to avoid situations of conflicts of interest for the conference and its participants.

The points given in our letter are in line with the views expressed by the authors of the article "*How to stop public health conferences becoming trade fairs*", Public Health Nutrition 12(9), 2009. We hope that this communication will contribute to constructive discussions on these important issues.

Best wishes,



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