Is the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) an NGO?

GAIN is applying to get status as an NGO in official relations with WHO. Their inclusion goes against WHO's current valid NGO policy which is explicit and defines NGOs as those groups that are "free from concerns that are primarily of a commercial or profit-making nature." ¹

GAIN is not an NGO. It is a public private hybrid entity with assets of $61 million (largely due to large grants from the GATES Foundation). GAIN claims to be an alliance “driven by the vision of a world without malnutrition” but its goal illustrates the commercial side of GAIN’s approach: “to reach 1 billion people by 2015 with nutritious food…” But this is not as aid. It is through the creation of markets:²

GAIN is on the Lead Group of the Scaling Up Nutrition Initiative (SUN), another public private hybrid entity, so it is in a key position to formulate SUN strategies and influence development of nutrition policies at national and global level. GAIN and SUN encourage dealing with food and nutrition via Public Private Partnerships and Multi-Stakeholder Platforms.

GAIN and WHO: Last year the WHO Executive Board (EB) decided to postpone consideration of GAIN’s application to be an ‘NGO’ in official relations with WHO because it was concerned about “the nature and extent of the Alliance’s links with the global food industry.” The EB asked for more information about “the position of the Alliance with regard to its support and advocacy of WHO’s nutrition policies, including infant feeding and marketing of complementary food.” To increase its chances of success, GAIN says that it closed down its Business Alliance in December 2013 and merged it with the SUN Business Network (SBN). This new SBN, launched at the Davos World Economic Forum this week, will be “overseen by an Advisory Group made up of business and including civil society” which of course includes GAIN.³

It is clear that GAIN’s goal remains commercial: to create markets for products. For example, also this week, GAIN sponsored a nutrition feature in the Guardian with a headline: “Empowering pregnant women to seek out fortified foods” – cleverly replacing “advertising to” with “empowering”. ⁴ This strategy of promoting fortified foods and supplements, not only creates major market opportunities but can undermine women’s confidence in breastfeeding and sustainable family foods. (see WHA 55.25 para 2.4)⁵ It can also undermine small farmers and smallholders in the developing world, who play a critically important role in ensuring local food security.

Interestingly, GAIN’s website still features its Business Alliance and the logos of member companies who promote processed foods high in salt, sugar and/or fat: PepsiCo, Coca Cola, GlaxoSmithKline, Cargill, Kraft Foods, Hershey’s, Tate & Lyle and Britmania and DSM (a manufacturer of ingredients of breastfeeding substitutes). Moreover, GAIN’s Board contains representatives from food companies, such as Britmania and Renata.

Pressuring Governments: In 2012 GAIN was discovered to be pressuring the Kenyan government to weaken its draft law on baby food marketing. In a Policy briefing, GAIN implied that proceeding with the law would threaten “Kenya’s ability to meet its commitments as a Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) country.” The Kenyan Government was able to counter these threats and adopted the law without weakening it. The Head of Nutrition, Terry Wafwafu, later said that GAIN “came in as sheep and only later did we realise that we had welcomed wolves.”

GAIN promotes misleading assessments: GAIN sponsored an ‘innovative’ approach to ranking companies called the Access to Nutrition Index (ATNI). This has become a ‘whitewash’ or ‘PR Cover’ for corporations whose top strategic priority is to replace traditional foods in developing countries with ultra-processed foods. ATNI scores the world’s largest food and beverage manufacturers on the basis of their written policies and statements, rather than on independent monitoring of their actual marketing and political strategies. This flawed methodology gives the highest scores to the companies that market highly processed unhealthy foods and who violate WHO’s recommendations. When ATNI’s first report was published in March 2013, the media described Danone, Unilever, Nestle, PepsiCo and Kraft as the "best large firms worldwide when it comes to offering products that address both the problems of obesity and poor nutrition..." ⁶

To conclude, GAIN and similar public private hybrid entities divert public health agendas towards agendas guided by market profit-making logic. These entities include actors and advisors whose PRIMARY interest (fiduciary duty to maximise shareholder value) inevitably clashes with the public health mandate of WHO.

¹ WHO Basic Documents, 47th edition, 2009
² http://www.gainhealth.org/about-gain
⁵ WHA 55.25 2. URGES Member States, as a matter of urgency: (4) to ensure that the introduction of micronutrient interventions and the marketing of nutritional supplements do not replace, or undermine support for the sustainable practice of, exclusive breastfeeding and optimal complementary feeding
⁶ http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/12/access-to-nutrition-index/1979581/