PRESS RELEASE

GAIN – Industry’s Trojan Horse fails to enter WHO’s policy setting process

WHO’s 132nd Executive Board, Geneva

29th January 2013

The failure of GAIN (the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition)\(^1\) to obtain official relations status with the World Health Organisation (WHO) as an NGO, has been warmly welcomed by health campaigners and IBFAN, the global network working to protect infant health.\(^2\) GAIN is a new type of public private entity which claims to work to tackle malnutrition - but in reality its work seems to focus on opening up markets for its 600 partner companies (including Danone, the world’s second largest baby food company, Mars, Pepsi, and Coca Cola).

On the final day of deliberations of its 132nd meeting, in a briefly worded Resolution,\(^3\) WHO’s Executive Board (EB) called for answers regarding GAIN’s links with food corporations and its lobbying tactics.\(^4\) The EB decided to:

“... postpone consideration of the application for admission into official relations from The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition to the Executive Board’s 134th session, and requested that the following information be provided to the Board through its Standing Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations: information concerning the nature and extent of the Alliance’s links with the global food industry, and the position of the Alliance with regard to its support and advocacy of WHO’s nutrition policies, including infant feeding and marketing of complementary foods.”

This decision implies that IBFAN’s concerns about the lack of transparency, about GAIN’s true nature and purpose in the application process,\(^5\) and its attempts to undermine implementation of key WHA Resolutions on infant and young child feeding, were taken up by members of the Standing Committee on Non-governmental organisations.

Conflicts of Interest were a key cross-cutting issue throughout the 8-day Executive Board meeting, where Member States tackled WHO’s Reform process and the future of the agency’s financing. Countless Member States called for more clarity on WHO’s conflicts of interest procedures and more caution in its relations with the Private Sector. While the Director General of WHO, Dr Margaret Chan, is now repeatedly stressing the importance of protecting WHO’s ‘norms and standards’ setting process, it remains

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\(^1\) http://www.gainhealth.org/partnerships/business-alliance/members

\(^2\) IBFAN is a 33-year old coalition of 273 not-for-profit non-governmental organizations in 168 developing and industrialized nations. www.ibfan.org


\(^4\) In October IBFAN learned that GAIN had been challenging the Kenya government about its proposed new law on the marketing of baby foods. In its lobby paper GAIN implied that proceeding with the law would threaten “Kenya’s ability to meet its commitments as a Scaling Up Nutrition [SUN] country.” Thankfully Kenya went ahead with the Law. At the Codex Alimentarius meetings GAIN consistently lobbies for companies to be allowed to use promotional claims – knowing that this could prevent Member States from banning such tactics. In December GAIN’s lack of transparency was demonstrated in an exchange in the British Medical Journal, which challenged the ground-breaking baby food law in India that has been so critical in the protection of breastfeeding and child health. (http://info.babymilkaction.org/132ndEB2013)

\(^5\) WHO’s Standing Committee on NGOs (consisting of 5 countries: Armenia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Seychelles and Ecuador) met in a closed meeting on Tuesday, 22nd January and none of the application papers were publicly available. http://apps.who.int/gho/ebwha/pdf_files/EB132/B132_34-en.pdf
to be seen if WHO will indeed adopt a coherent and effective policy that will protect itself and the international policy making process from undue influence of the private commercial sector.

In the debate on the Policy for 'Engagement with NGOs' Nils Daubaire, of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, called for wider engagement of "non-state actors – whether public interest or business oriented" and for all to be dealt with on an equal basis. However the US acknowledged the risks of undue influence, warning that ‘briefcase NGOs’ working for others should not be given opportunities to take advantage of lax rules.’ Other countries, such as Ecuador called for corporations, who they consider to be ‘providers,’ to be consulted only when necessary.

The term 'Briefcase NGO’ could apply to Public Private Partnership Partnerships (PPPs) or to entities like GAIN, that are often front organisations for businesses. but describe themselves in different ways, sometimes as PPPs and sometimes as Alliances. These bodies often have multiple purposes, and alongside their public health objectives, they assist commercial companies in the creation of markets for their products.

GAIN’s application for official relations status with WHO came just as WHO is to start work on the guidelines for the marketing of complementary foods – a key policy issue that GAIN is keen to influence. Indeed as the Standing Committee on NGOs Report showed and expressed concern, GAIN has already channelled funds to WHO for its micronutrient work.6 One of GAIN’s projects, funded by the Gates’ Foundation, aims to reach 500 million women and children with fortified foods.7

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6 “The Committee noted that the Alliance provided some funding to WHO. In the view of the Committee, great care should be taken in considering relations with organizations that fund WHO.” Standing Committee on NGOs report.
7 http://www.gainhealth.org/performance/project-results