Corporate Social Responsibility or corporate cover-up?

Many of the campaigns we ask our members to support involve countering corporate sponsorship, public private partnerships and other Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies. A purpose of CSR is to improve a company’s public image and help it appear responsible and trustworthy – trustworthy enough to be left alone to self-regulate. A consequence of CSR is that public attention and energy are diverted from independent monitoring and the regulation of harmful practices.

CSR is much used by the baby feeding industry and at the 2010 AGM Nestlé’s Chair Peter Brabeck claimed that “lyng corporations up in regulatory straightjackets is unnecessary when companies such as Nestlé already have sound principles and core values.”

Peter Brabeck is also the Chair of the World Economic Forum (WEF). In its Global Redesign Initiative WEF proposes that some issues are taken off the agenda of the UN system and are addressed instead by ‘private sector partnerships’. It claims that “changes in the organisation of multinational corporations, nation states (including through the UN system) and select civil society organisations’...”

As the collective influence of corporations has grown, some governments are choosing to accept this market profit making logic, forgetting their duty to protect public health. In the short term this avoids a struggle before long the costs are sure to be felt.

How did we get here?

Appointing responsible and being seen to be working closely with WHO and the UN have been corporate counter-strategies ever since the adoption of the International Code in 1981. Indeed, the Code seems to have been a game changer that took not only the baby feeding industry – but other industries – by surprise.

More so because it remained on WHO’s agenda and was transformed into binding legislation at national level.

In 1981 the International Tobacco Information Center (INFOTAB), watching in the wings as events unfolded, concluded that the infant formula experience has put back the multinational cause by 8-10 years. Others commented that the baby feeding industry was badly prepared.

Companies saw the need to develop counter strategies and convince governments that there was no need for more international codes, regulations or conventions. Companies needed to be seen as ‘socially responsible’ and willing to self-regulate through voluntary codes.

Fast forward to Pete Brabeck’s 2010 statement.

Over the years we have documented and exposed how industries that do harm use CSR as a cover-up and a deceptive form of marketing. Baby Milk Action members and supporters are often the first to expose the power of corporations to affect policy and shape regulations at national level.

Today we have opposition from forces that are not so friendly... They include front groups, lobbies, promises of self regulation, lawsuits, and industry-funded research that confuses the evidence and keeps the public in doubt. In the view of WHO, the formulation of health policies must be protected from distortion by commercial or vested interests.

Dr Margaret Chan, Director General, WHO, June 2013
Members and supporters were essential in raising awareness of the importance of protecting optimal infant and young child health. Area contacts and staff held stalls and workshops at events in the UK including the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers, Baby Friendly Initiative, La Leche League and People and Planet.

We coordinate the International Nestlé Boycott, the company responsible for more aggressive baby food promotion than any other. We also campaign against bad practices by other companies such as Danone.

We promoted International Nestlé-Free Week at the end of October, a week for those who boycott Nestlé products to tell their friends and colleagues – and for those who don’t boycott, to give it a go.

We produced an analysis of Nestlé’s latest Creating Shared Value report in time for its shareholder AGM in April, which we called ‘Nestlé’s Creative Storytelling Venture’, as Nestlé’s claims are so misleading.

We continued to promote a campaign of solidarity with the Philippines as a Nestlé-backed bill came before Congress, threatening to weaken its hard-won baby milk marketing regulations. Nestlé’s ‘Monster Bill’ is not yet dead.

We launched the report Look What They’re Doing in the UK 2013 in April. This presents evidence from the monitoring project we coordinate on behalf of the Baby Feeding Law Group (BFLG). The electronic pdf file had been downloaded from our website over 35,000 times by the end of September. We sold or distributed over a thousand printed copies.

We presented the Look What They’re Doing report at a meeting between the BFLG and the Department of Health in July, renewing our call for action to enforce existing regulations, which prohibit many of the practices we have documented. The report was also sent to the companies found to break the rules. (Following this period, Danone agreed to stop two of its practices.)

We continued the campaign to encourage health workers to report violations of advertising rules. (Following this period, Nestlé agreed to stop two of its practices.)

We have been calling for a ban on Nestlé sponsorship for five years, but we continue to receive sponsorship for the Nestlé-Baby Milk Action Breastfeeding Calendar.

We worked to ensure that the safeguards of the International Code and Resolutions are included in UK EU and United Nations policies. We are the Secretariat of the Baby Feeding Law Group that works to strengthen UK legislation and the EU Directive which are currently under review.

We represent IBFAN on the European Commission’s controversial Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. We take part in order to raise awareness of the risks of voluntary multi-stakeholder approaches, and the need for the Commission and Member States to take greater control of the process. The Platform gives industry and NGOs access to policy makers and is used as a global model. We call for harmonisation with WHO Resolutions, independent monitoring and an end to corporate sponsorship of education. An evaluation of the Platform after 7 years found no evidence of concrete impact from the voluntary approach.

We held several events at hotels as many as possible.

We continued to campaign to license all industry-funded initiatives that support breastfeeding. The Platform after 7 years has failed to deliver on its promise.

We helped organise a letter from international NGOs to President Nieto about the new Crusade Against Hunger and the partnerships with companies such as Nestlé and Pepsi (See below left.)

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We are a Trustee of Sustain, and member of the Children’s Food Bill, the UK Consortium on AIDS and the UK Food Group.

We coordinate the Baby Milk Action/Fast Feeding Mothers, Baby Friendly Initiative, La Leche League and People and Planet.

We are the Secretariat of the 23 Member UK baby feeding Law Group (BFLG) including the Royal Colleges of Midwives, Nursing and Paediatrics, the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors’ Association, NCT and UNISON. We helped set up the UK Code advocacy and published a Code advocacy.

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We provide support to the Lancashire Infant Feeding Information Board (LIFIB) as it evaluates information from baby food companies.

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