

EMBARGOED TILL 28TH .JULY.2014, 4:00 PM (IST)

Press Release
28th .July .2014
New Delhi

Say No to big food companies in public nutrition policy & programmes

We the undersigned organizations are deeply concerned about growing influence of big food companies in the food systems of India, with the view to capture what is potentially a vast market. Over the years, we have contested the attempts by the private sector to infiltrate public feeding programs like the Mid Day Meals and ICDS by advocating for ready to eat packaged foods as substitutes to freshly cooked meals and local foods.

It is well known that India is also facing increasing prevalence of obesity and non-communicable disease which are caused mainly by unhealthy dietary patterns influenced by the intense marketing by big food corporations. According to WHO and leading science journals like Lancet, risks of sugary drinks and junk foods on health are high on obesity, diabetes and even deaths.

It is in this context that there is a global acceptance of the need to prevent conflicts of interest in order to protect public nutrition policy from vested interests. As cautioned by Dr. Margaret Chan WHO DG in her address to the Global Conference on Health Promotion in 2013, *"Public health must also contend with big food, big soda and big alcohol...when industry is involved in policy-making, rest assured that the most effective control measures will be downplayed or left out entirely. This, too, is well documented and dangerous."*

Though statements related to the need to prevent conflict of interest are often made, the Government of India is yet to do anything about it particularly in the area of food and nutrition. On the other hand, it seems to be creating space for big corporations to enter public nutrition policy and programmes in various ways.

The NFSA (National Food Security Act) removed any conditions on the food entitlements to meet 50% of RDA(Recommended Daily Allowance) for all micronutrients in the bare Act following the amendments to the Ordinance agreed by all political parties and protests by the civil society organization. However, [the draft rules framed under the Act, by the Ministry of Women and Child Development](#) (on its website) brings back such extremely stringent conditions on the composition of the meal. It seems these stringent conditions are so framed as to make them difficult to be met with by any low budget (though fully public spirited) organization. Such conditions would favour processed food supplied by corporate or commercial entities and make it impossible for local groups such as 'mahila mandals' (women's group) and SHGs to be involved in supply of meals and take home rations.

We appreciate the recent World Health Assembly statement that India made on the issue of conflicts of interest where it cautioned about indirect funding from industry harming human health. It is however ironical there are instances where the Government of India is creating conditions for organisations with conflicts of interests to occupy policy spaces. For example, the reproductive, maternal, newborn child health (RMNCH) coalition initiated by the government has number of NGOs and agencies as members, are funded by big food corporations. Moreover, the secretariat of this coalition is housed in one of these international NGOs.

While on the one hand we see such indirect engagement with the private sector, on the other hand the Government is **not** putting in place a strong regulatory approach on marketing of unhealthy foods. When it comes to the issue of dealing with big food corporations the Government speaks in the language of “engagement” rather than “regulation”. This once again opens doors for these companies to expand their markets through government actions or inaction.

We strongly oppose bringing powerful profit-making economic actors into policy-making discussions on the same footing as public-interest civil society organizations and individuals.

We demand that the Government of India:

- Brings in a strong legislation to prevent direct and indirect conflicts of interest in public policy making and public programmes.
- Withdraws from and avoids future partnerships where there is direct and indirect danger of conflict of interest.
- Regulates marketing of processed and unhealthy foods by food corporations
- Removes any conditionality under NFSA to impose 50% of the required dietary allowance (RDA) for micronutrients, to come from the meals served at the Anganwadi centres.

Alliance Against Conflict of Interest

BPNI/IBFAN Asia

Working group for children under six of (Jan Swasthya Abhiyan and Right to Food Campaign)

India Resource Centre

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Notes for the editor:

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<http://www.epw.in/commentary/manipulation-association.html>

Bellagio Declaration 2013, Countering Big Foods Undermining of Healthy Food Policies
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/obr.12104/asset/obr12104.pdf?v=1&t=hy2ufwar&s=e8f53681f9f584a6a12130446761fe0376743946>

Joint statement to the WHO on the informal meeting of ICN 2 with non-state actors
<http://www.babymilkaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MTG-11-Julyfinal3.pdf>

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<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/92/2/13-120543/en/>

Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020

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Draft rules framed under NFSA, 2013 - Ministry of Women Child Development.

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