

# THE SCALING UP NUTRITION (SUN) INITIATIVE

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The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Initiative emerged from a World Bank initiative in 2009, and calls itself a global “movement” that unites governments, civil society, businesses and citizens in a worldwide effort to end under-nutrition. While SUN now says it promotes government-led initiatives, its fundamental approach is entrenched in the frequent donor-driven emphasis on market-led “product” and high-tech solutions to malnutrition, rather than on community-based solutions rooted in human rights and equity. It thus threatens to further bias development assistance by involving the private sector at all levels, e.g., by encouraging low-income governments to enter into “partnerships” and to set up “platforms” with businesses (and their not-for profit front groups). In doing so, it leaves the issue of conflict of interest wide open. This approach conflicts with World Health Assembly resolutions which call for safeguards against conflicts of interest in policy development and implementation of nutrition programs, thus leaving policy and direction to those who have a duty to protect public health. While businesses can play a role in development, their fiduciary duty lies first with shareholders, not with public health. SUN’s promotion of partnerships with businesses thus provides corporations with unprecedented opportunities to influence national, regional and global policies.<sup>2</sup>

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), discussed in the *Watch* 2012, is a member of SUN’s Lead Group. It claims to address malnutrition, but also strives to facilitate the opening up of markets for its 600 partner companies (among others, Danone, Pepsico, Coca Cola, Britannia).<sup>3</sup> Together with its baby food company members, GAIN has been pushing for WHO/FAO global food standards to be weakened so as to allow marketing of a whole new range of fortified products for infants and young children. GAIN’s application for official NGO relations status with WHO was not approved by the WHO Executive Board in January of 2013, pending answers to questions about its relations with global corporations, and allegations about its lobbying against World Health Assembly resolutions on baby foods.<sup>4</sup>

The Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, has warned SUN that it must not dismiss explicitly aligning its initiatives with human rights, including the right to food, i.e., not “overlook the entitlements that have been established under international law for women, children, minorities, refugees and internally displaced persons, and other groups that may be subjected to marginalization and discrimination”.<sup>5</sup>

But there is more to be concerned about the SUN initiative: Serious conflicts of interest exist on SUN’s lead policy setting board; SUN has created the opportunity for commercial food companies to have an influential role in the UN system’s food and nutrition governance and policy decision-making; the SUN initiative does not explicitly acknowledge the structural causes of all forms of malnutrition; and SUN

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2 SUN Movement status and claims at a Glance (March 2013): 34 countries; 32 focal points nominated; 30 countries with established multi-stakeholder platforms; 21 countries reported to have cost nutrition plans already endorsed or being finalized; 13 countries already reducing stunting at an annual rate of 2% and above; 50 million of stunted children under 5 reached by the program.

3 “Business Alliance Members.” *GAIN*. [www.gainhealth.org/partnerships/business-alliance/members](http://www.gainhealth.org/partnerships/business-alliance/members).

risks increasing low-income countries' dependence on inappropriate import products and foreign expertise.

A disproportionate percentage of SUN's initial budget is allocated to curative interventions in part based on commercial ready-to-use therapeutic foods. Despite the involvement of civil society organisations, SUN is still a top-down UN- and business-led initiative; and it is a misnomer to call it a "movement" because the involvement of international public- and business-interest NGOs does not make it bottom-up. Participating food corporations can use SUN to whitewash their activities, giving them invaluable public relations benefits.

For all of the above reasons, movements that are critical of the SUN approach have good reason to be reluctant to seek participation in the initiative. While the authors do support SUN's call for multi-sectoral action on nutrition, and do recognize that many non-private organizations are working hard under the SUN umbrella to tackle malnutrition, they cannot support a strategy that allows commercial private entities (or their front bodies such as GAIN) to be on SUN's lead group or on country platforms.

Not surprisingly, SUN does not comment on the possible harmful impact of the marketing of member companies' ultra-processed foods on local food cultures and their contribution to obesity and non-communicable diseases. Despite its insistence that it supports breastfeeding, we see no way in which SUN can prevent companies from using their public relations and their access to policy-making to damage the funding, support and protection of sustainable food cultures and optimal infant and young child feeding. It is only a matter of time before companies begin using the entry point SUN allows them to gain improper access to parents while pretending they are only interested in "promoting breastfeeding." This is, of course, forbidden by the International Code and WHA resolutions. We believe that the risks of what is said here need to be independently researched, acknowledged and addressed.

- 4 The WHO's Executive Board (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 134<sup>th</sup> 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." WHO's Executive Board (EB), "Relations with Non-governmental Organizations." 28 January 2013. [http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/EB132/B132\\_R9-en.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB132/B132_R9-en.pdf); see also IBFAN, "GAIN—industry's Trojan Horse fails to enter WHO's policy setting process," press release, 29 January 2013. <http://babymilkaction.org/pressrelease/pressrelease31jan13>.
- 5 "Compilation Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in Accordance with Paragraph 10 of Human Rights Council Resolution 16/22." United Nations General Assembly, 26 Dec. 2011. [www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/19session/A.HRC.19.50\\_English.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/19session/A.HRC.19.50_English.pdf).