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The ultra-processed food industry has no business in sponsoring health and nutrition events

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A recent event “Nourish and flourish: The role of nutrition in improving women’s health outcomes” organised by media platform Devex in partnership with Nestlé is the latest example in a long history of corporate infiltration of public health policy discourse. The event had been planned to take place on 17 July, but after a flurry of criticism via social media and open letters, Devex first postponed the event,¹ before later cancelling it, along with the wider partnership with Nestlé.

Devex is an international news organisation and a media partner of the United Nations and covers global development. Nestlé is one of a handful of transnational food behemoths who for decades have employed well honed industry tactics to make friends and influence people in the world of global health and nutrition policy.²

The “deadly Ds” of policy interference include denying harms, disputing evidence, sowing doubt, disguising involvement (via front groups), and deflecting criticism with small scale, but high visibility partnerships like this one.³

For many years, Nestlé has proactively sought to “retain and reward” influential academics who are favourable to its products and practices.⁴ Endorsement by association is just one of many tactics from the well thumbed corporate playbook to mislead policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and the wider public.⁵

The proposed event would have coincided with the launch of “Materna,” a new Nestlé product line (of costly “tailored nutritional solutions”) aimed at pregnant and postpartum women.⁶

University nutrition symposia have also been targeted for sponsorship, including the 14th Continuing Nutrition Education Symposium at the University of Pretoria in September 2019, similar examples from East Africa,⁷ and more recently when the European Obesity Congress removed Nestlé as a sponsor after protests.⁸

Devex has in the past highlighted the threats posed by Nestlé and other infant formula manufacturers and the need to uphold and strengthen the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes.⁹

So why did Devex engage with Nestlé in the first place?

We wrote to the executive editor to ask this question. She responded to say this was an “advertising partnership” that was deemed acceptable as “we were explicitly not addressing the topic of infant nutrition and because Nestlé is a regular partner and funder of global health organisations.”

This was perplexing to us: first, by the way Devex had disconnected women’s health from infant health, given the long track record of the formula industry exploiting women’s nutrition to influence infant nutrition (via the cross promotion of products and brand recognition), and second by the creeping normalisation of Nestlé as a “regular partner.”

Recently, the World Health Organization released a practical tool to help member states decide whether, when, and how to engage with the private sector.¹⁰ The tool includes a due diligence process to follow and exclusionary criteria to “exclude engagement with private sector entities that harm public health.” This includes “the avoidance of all partnerships with entities from the food and beverage industry that violate the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes.” Along with other formula companies, Nestlé has come under criticism on numerous occasions for the way in which it markets baby milk formulas.^{11–13}

The tool also highlights the “promotion and marketing of breast milk substitutes, alcohol products, sugar sweetened beverages, and unhealthy foods contrary to WHO’s international codes, technical products and guidance” as major controversies which should be avoided. In April 2024, Public Eye and the International Baby Foods Action Network released a report describing how Nestlé was adding sugar to infant milk and cereal products sold in many low income countries.¹⁴ Similar products sold in Switzerland and other European countries contained no added sugar. The highest amount found—more than 7 grams per serving (nearly two whole sugar cubes)—was detected in the Philippines in a product targeted at 6 month old babies. Nestlé responded to the investigation, saying there was some regional variation in its recipes but that the company is always transparent about the total sugars in their products.¹⁵

Given this history and the new guidance, it was disappointing to see that a section head of UN Women, Jemimah Njuki, was an invited speaker at the Devex event. Why isn’t the United Nations united on conflicts of interest? We wrote to Njuki to ask why she had agreed to speak at a Nestlé partnership event, but received no response.

On 16 August, Unicef released new guidance to help advocates counter industry opposition to code implementation. Argument 19 of 36 focused on conflicts of interest, including sponsorship, stating Unicef’s unequivocal position that such conflicts cannot be managed, and they need to be avoided altogether.¹⁶

Many have called for academics, researchers, and health professionals and organisations to walk away from offers of funding from the infant formula industry.⁷ Having worked in this area for many years, with different UN agencies, it's extraordinary to us that partnerships like this are still proposed and considered. The effort exerted in calling it out, time and time again, is energy that could and should be channelled to supporting young researchers and practitioners who want to make a difference.

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