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Scope_of_Activities: International, national, regional

Mandate_of_the_Organization: Baby Milk Action is a Non-profit Company Limited by Guarantee which was set up to protect health, save infant lives and to end the avoidable suffering caused by inappropriate infant feeding. Baby Milk Action works within the global network (IBFAN) to strengthen independent, transparent and effective controls on the marketing of the baby feeding industry worldwide

Interest: Baby Milk Action works to end the inappropriate marketing policies and practices of the baby feeding industry, and to ensure that mothers, infants and young children worldwide are effectively represented wherever decisions affecting infant and young child feeding are made

Sources_of_Funding: UK developments NGOs, European Commission (Development), membership subscriptions and sales of materials.

Comments: I attach some comments along with documents which will be sent by mail.

**Diet Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases
Report of the Joint FAO/WHO Consultation Document
Comments by Baby Milk Action. June 2002**

Baby Milk Action:

Baby Milk Action aims to save infant lives and to end the avoidable suffering caused by inappropriate infant and young child feeding. We work within a global network to strengthen independent, transparent and effective controls on the marketing of the baby feeding industry and to ensure that mothers, infants and young children are effectively represented wherever decisions affecting infant and young child feeding are made. Baby Milk Action is the UK member of **IBFAN** (the network of 200 citizens groups working in over 100 countries) and a member and Trustee of **Sustain**, *the Alliance for better food and farming* (representing around 100 UK public interest organisations).

1 Introduction

Baby Milk Action appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft FAO/WHO report on *Diet Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases* and congratulates its authors. In our work to promote food systems that are sustainable, indigenous, equitable, and environmentally friendly, Baby Milk Action, IBFAN and Sustain have studied the ways that food companies influence health, health policies and public perception of what is, and what is not, a healthy diet. So we see this report and WHO's commitment to these issues as a very important step forward.

We welcome in particular Dr Brundtland's statement at the World Health Assembly outlining WHO's intention to *'reinvigorate its work on diet and nutrition and to address the issue of excessive consumption of fatty, sugary and salty foods.... Getting loyalty to brand names is the key to influencing consumer behaviour - from the time children start to walk.'*

Pregnant women are seen as a *"valuable commercial opportunity"* and brand loyalty has an impact before even babies are born, so we are pleased with the report's emphasis on the life cycle approach, since this will inevitably include infant and young child feeding.

Evidence about the benefits of breastfeeding, the consumption of water and fresh fruits and vegetables continues to mount alongside growing concern about the promotion of sugary fatty and salty foods. Seventy-six national organisations have now confirmed their support for Sustain's campaign to protect children from unhealthy food advertising. This includes a wide range of medical and health organisations, and groups representing children, such as the Royal College of General Practitioners, the National Obesity Forum, the Family Heart Association, the Guild of Food Writers and the National Federation of Consumer Groups. Sustain's Food Labelling and Marketing working group has also set up a new working group specifically to address Food-Related Commercial Activities in Schools.

A WHO code or framework, which addressed marketing to children, would give power and a much-needed international perspective to such initiatives. With this in mind, and in addition to our endorsement of the comments already sent by GIFA on behalf of the whole IBFAN network, we would like to make some general concerns and suggestions, which we feel will increase the likelihood of the initiative's success.

2 Infant and young child feeding

Baby Milk Action recommends that the report gives much more emphasis to the importance of optimal nutrition early in life in the prevention of non-communicable diseases. In the vast majority of circumstances this will be breastfeeding which is an essential lifeline for millions of infants.

Infants who are not breastfed lack the factors that strengthen the immune function against a range of infectious diseases and reduce the risk of chronic childhood diseases and conditions, including diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, allergies, asthma, and childhood cancers. Breastfeeding also provides psychological and physical benefits which extend throughout the whole life cycle.

Breastfeeding, as is becoming more and more evident, also confers numerous benefits to women's health.

Environmental factors are also important and should be addressed. From this standpoint, there can be no food more locally produced, more sustainable or more environmentally friendly than a mother's breastmilk. It is a naturally renewable resource, which requires no packaging or transport, results in no wastage and is free. Breastfeeding along with the use of appropriate local complementary foods can also help reduce family poverty, which is a major cause of malnutrition.

Recommendation:

- **The report should give increased emphasis to breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding, and should make clear references to the urgent need for compliance with the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and all its Resolutions, stressing its three fundamental principles.**
 1. **That the Code and its Resolutions are universal and apply to ALL countries**
 2. **That they cover ALL breastmilk substitutes, not just infant formula**
 3. **That companies must comply with the Code and all its Resolutions in ALL countries, independently of government action.**

3 The role of the private sector

Baby Milk Action endorses the recommendations of GIFA-IBFAN that there should be greater clarity regarding dialogue and interactions with the food industry. The report acknowledges that commercial pressures have delayed progress on the prevention of non-communicable diseases. It is important that from the outset these pressures are not only identified, but that strategies are devised to ensure that they are not allowed to weaken the thrust of this initiative, or worse still, subvert it.

While the initiative should send out a clear call to the whole food industry to improve products and end all irresponsible marketing, it is important that responses to such a call should be handled carefully. Baby Milk Action considers that the risks of describing the food industry as a 'partner' in this initiative or using food companies for 'resource mobilisation' far outweigh the benefits. Through its dealings with the tobacco industry, WHO is also well aware of these risks. WHO must protect its independence if it is to lead the way forward in consumer protection, helping governments frame sound national food policies, working closely with consumer protection groups and providing clear policy guidance for the food industry.

IBFAN has studied the way that companies use any association or link with the UN to portray a responsible image, knowing the commercial importance of building trust in the corporate name and brand. Marketing clearly has an effect at a subconscious and conscious level. This is illustrated well by the many millions of mothers who, because of clever and deceptive labelling and promotion, so readily place trust in branded artificial milks, with all its attendant risks, rather than in their own bodies to provide nourishment their infants. Indeed the infant formula labels of the largest baby food manufacturer have for years stated: *Lactogen 1 is guaranteed by Nestlé, known and trusted by mothers throughout the world.*

Similarly when other foods and drinks carry claims relating to health or links to prestigious trusted organisations, consumer confidence in water and locally available fresh fruits and vegetables is undermined.

Companies know that it's difficult for people to believe that a company can work closely with organisations such as WHO and at the same time knowingly undermine health or risk a child's life. Indeed in 1999 the public relations firm Saatchi & Saatchi advised the world's largest food company to *"aggressively advertise its links with charities and good causes"* precisely to offset bad publicity and to build *"a surplus account for the times when you have a crisis."* (*Marketing Week*, Feb 1999)

We are pleased to see that a clear distinction is now being made between 'civil society' and the 'private sector.' As more and more corporations make far-reaching promises about 'corporate responsibility' it will be vital for WHO to establish the validity of such promises before any public pronouncements are made about them. The food companies that most aggressively promote the unhealthiest foods (in terms of fat, sugar and salt) have enormous PR budgets and can easily present small recipe changes in niche products as major steps forward in sustainable development.

Recommendations:

- **WHO's Guidelines on Interactions with the Private Sector should be strengthened, updated and reviewed on a regular basis. IBFAN has provided comments on how this could be done.**
- **There should be rigorous transparency regarding all interactions between WHO and the private sector,**
- **In all interactions with the private sector a clear unequivocal message should be given of the need for respect for and compliance with WHA Resolutions.**
- **Company statements/promises should be monitored and verified before any pronouncements are made by WHO.**

4 The role of NGOs and governments

If WHO is to succeed in this initiative it will need to enlist the support of the wide range of NGOs working on food, health and sustainable environments. All these factors are closely interlinked and essential components of 'health.' Until every country has effective government-sponsored food and environmental surveillance systems, NGOs will play a crucial role as watchdogs, raising public awareness and acting as catalysts for change. The power such action has in safeguarding health has been demonstrated not only in relation to infant feeding but also to issues such as genetic engineering, food irradiation, BSE etc. If the consumer movement is to continue in this critical role, its independence and its findings must be respected. WHO must not

attempt to weaken the thrust of this movement by drawing the NGO community into inappropriate relationships and partnerships with industries that are responsible for much of the problem.

We are working closely with UK and European Parliamentarians, to establish legal jurisdiction covering the abuses of European companies in developing countries to ensure that the Board Members of corporations are held personally accountable for their practices. WHO could do much to support these moves which are opposed by the food industry.

Recommendations:

- **WHO should support legal measures for enforcing corporate responsibility in relation to food marketing.**

5 The need for controls on health claims

If WHO is to play a key role in the efforts to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables, it will also have to take a much more active role in setting standards for labelling and marketing of processed foods, especially in relation to the use health claims and the medicalisation of foods. It is all too easy for consumers to be misled by health and quasi-medical claims which can so easily imply that highly processed, sugary, salty, fatty and environmentally unsustainable foods – with just a few micronutrients added - will confer enormous health advantages - the same advantages as fresh fruits and vegetables. Inappropriate food patterns can have a devastating impact on national and family economies in terms of import, environmental impact and purchasing and health service costs.

Fortified junk foods and quick fix solutions are not the answer to malnutrition and WHO should ensure that it does not by default, (through partnerships such as GAIN) become party to strategies which promote junk foods.

These issues are currently being actively discussed at Codex, and the food industry is lobbying hard to weaken the standards on health claims and labelling. IBFAN's position (and that of Consumers International) is that health claims should not be permitted on any food, and especially not for foods for infants and young children or foods for pregnant and lactating women. This is in recognition of the difficulties involved in verification of claims, and the unfair advantage they convey to packaged foods.

It would be enormously helpful if WHO were to throw its full weight behind those governments and consumer groups that are seeking bring in controls on health claims and to trying protect the right of national governments to set their own health priorities. In the first instance this report could state clearly that there should be no health claims for foods for infants and young children. This proposal has already reached Step 5 at Codex, and WHO's strong unequivocal support at this stage would do much to protect infant and young child health.

Recommendation:

- **The report could clearly express concern about the use of health claims and stress the need for strong controls. It should state clearly that (in line with WHA Resolutions on infant feeding) there should be no health claims for foods for infants and young children.**

6 Promotion in Schools

“All too often the education process is entrusted to people who appear to have no understanding of industry and the path of progress...The provision of education is a market opportunity and should be treated as such”

European Round Table of Industrialists, 1988

Much more research needs to be carried out into marketing in schools and its influence on the next generation’s understanding of what is and what is not a healthy diet. The public need to understand why companies provide educational materials and how they help manipulate consumption patterns. Only then can we decide what constitutes socially responsible behaviour.

During the production of its education pack, *Seeing through the Spin*, Baby Milk Action carried out some limited research in the UK into this growing phenomenon and has since worked with UK NGOs to address the problem of food related marketing in schools. As governments cut back on resources for public services, education services are seen as major marketing opportunities to captive audiences and many food companies now boast that they are sponsoring education materials. Indeed, some even use it as evidence of social responsibility. Many of materials produced by food companies carry blatant promotion messages and misleading and deceptive nutrition information. Other materials are more subtle, but are equally dangerous and deceptive and can undermine the health messages the education facility is trying to promote.

Baby Milk Action and Sustain believe that it is extremely risky to entrust the vital role of nutrition education to companies that are actively promoting infant foods or sugary fatty or salty foods in the market place, however sound the materials may appear. IBFAN’s experience in examining the subtle ways that baby food industry ‘education materials’ have undermined breastfeeding (while pretending to support it) has given us insights into how easily health messages can be distorted and undermined.

Recommendation:

- **WHO, as part of this initiative, could instigate independent research into the impact of marketing on the very poor, and recommend that there should be no marketing of sugary, fatty or salty foods in schools and ideally no brand promotion of any food.**

PR June 2002