Baby Milk Action / IBFAN UK comments on the WHO Global Coordination Mechanism for the Prevention and Control of NCDs (WHO GCM/NCD),

Baby Milk Action is pleased to submit comments to this consultation.

Firstly we would like to point out that many of our concerns about the GCM/NCD are closely tied to the ongoing discussions on WHO’s NSA Framework and whether WHO and Member States will adopt adequate and effective Conflict of Interest (COI) safeguards, with criteria that make sense in the context of NCDs.

While acknowledging the need for cross sectoral collaboration, we are concerned that some of the procedures being followed and in particular the emphasis on “engagement” with the Private Sector, could affect the direction of the initiatives and the building of a consensus on NCDs that is in the public interest. The setting of inappropriate precedents could also undermine the development of an effective NSA Framework.

We acknowledge that carefully scrutinised hard data about markets and tactics could help inform decision-making. However in IBFAN’s three decade experience helping governments bring in effective controls on marketing, rarely have we witnessed corporations being willing to provide such information. Instead they offer opinions, and legally non-binding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) promises, such as help with nutrition and behaviour change education – despite WHO and the EU repeatedly warning of the risks of such involvement and the need for COI safeguards.

The world faces a multitude of nutritional challenges and WHO must be ready and free to help Member States tackle them in a robust and effective way. For example: by ensuring that trade agreements do not undermine health; by encouraging the integration of WHO recommendations within development policies; through the taxation of unhealthy foods and the regulation of marketing that exacerbates NCDs, through the protection and support of small farmers, fisherfolk and producers of bio-diverse, minimally processed and culturally appropriate food systems. Breastfeeding being the perfect example of a system that is under threat from marketing!

These issues will not be solved by too close involvement and partnerships with the most problematic corporations – whose vision of better health is that the whole world has better access to “slightly-better-for-you” highly processed junk foods and fortified supplements.

Is the GMC endorsing such thinking when its states on the GMC website:: “although an increased number of private sector entities have started to produce and promote food products consistent with a healthy diet, such products are not always broadly affordable, accessible and available in all communities within countries.”?

The ongoing debates on WHO Reform and NCDs demonstrate that COI safeguards are essential, not only in relation to WHO’s interactions with Civil Society but also within Member State delegations. Due diligence is meaningless without effective criteria, addressing not just “tobacco and arms.”

GCM and other NCD initiatives such as ECHO.

IBFAN agreed to join the GCM with some concern about the criteria its Information Note 1 (25th September 2014) and the emphasis on the use of the business term ‘stakeholder’ - a term that seems to have a subtle but profound influence on thinking and dialogue. In relation to the Screening of Non-State actors expressing an interest in participating in the WHO GCM/NCD the Note is wide open to misinterpretation. It seems to welcome applications from any business (except arms and tobacco industries) provided they have taken part in previous dialogues. “Willingness to work in a multi-stakeholder environment” is also cited in the criteria. The safeguard that “...screening of interested non-State actors to ensure that potential participants: Are not in any way involved in production or marketing of products that directly harm human health, including specifically tobacco and arms...[emphasis added] is entirely inadequate when considering the complexity of nutrition related problems.

1 Tanto zucchero please, siamo italiani, I Manifesto, 4.2.15  Nicoletta Dentico
While IBFAN has extensive experience in multi-sectoral fora (for example Codex, WHA, UN, national government consultations and initiatives such as the European Platform for Action in Diet Physical Activity and Health) we consider it a priority to point out the risks of inappropriate corporate involvement when these occur, either on Member State delegations, in policy setting or in certain aspects of implementation. In the context of infant and young child feeding the role of the baby feeding industry in implementation can be very problematic. Its appropriate role – to abide by the International Code and resolutions and manufacturer safe products - is defined by the Global Strategy on Infant and young Child feeding.

IBFAN is a founder member of the Conflict of Interest Coalition, an initiative that was launched at the UN in June 2011, that brought together 162 global networks and public interest organisations representing over 2000 NGOs, united by the common objective of safeguarding public health policy-making against commercial conflicts of interests.²

CSR IBFAN considers that too close involvement with corporations leads to a reliance on voluntary, non-binding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ‘carrot’ rather than ‘stick’ strategies - instead of independently monitored regulations that are evidently more effective in curbing harmful marketing.³

IBFAN took part in an ECHO NGO Hearing, noting with concern that a wide range of corporations were involved on exactly the same basis. The Summary Notes of both meetings on the WHO ECHO website gave a distorted and incomplete account of NGO concerns.⁴ Leaving aside the one welcome reference to the need to safeguard policy formulation, the notes ignored our call for tough marketing regulations, instead emphasising:

- the need to ‘engage’ to prevent bad practice: “There is a need to engage companies so that they do not violate regulatory frameworks.”
- the need for ‘guidelines’ and for other parties (school directors parents etc) to act: “It should not be left to companies to self-regulate. For example guidelines on the marketing of foods to children are still very vague”
- terms such as ‘individual choice’; ‘Gradual reformulation’ and ‘realistic targets.’
- an unspecified industry voluntary commitment due in 2016 and the Access to Nutrition Index - with no critical analysis. ⁵

² http://coicoalition.blogspot.com
³ There is evidence that companies with the poorest reputations, tend to produce the highest number of CSR reports (corporatecritic.org) all of them claiming a positive impact on society. CSR reporting helps companies build trust and promotes the notion that self-monitored, voluntary codes are preferable to binding regulation.
⁵ GAIN / Gates sponsored Index whitewashes giant food companies http://info.babymilkaction.org/pressrelease/pressrelease12mar13