



**Concentration of corporate power in global food systems
and its implications for the realization of the right to food
Call for Input: from Special Rapporteur on the right to food
IBFAN response. 12 June 2025**

Background: The [International Baby Food Action Network](#) (IBFAN) is a global network of over 300 citizens groups operating in more than 100 countries. IBFAN works to improve maternal, infant and young child health through the protection, promotion, and support of breastfeeding and optimal complementary feeding. Our work focuses on helping governments bring in regulations that prevent misleading marketing of baby feeding products, a fast-growing market that is dominated by a small number of transnational corporations. The promotion of highly processed, artificially flavoured and sweetened products that encourage unhealthy food preferences that start in childhood and extend throughout life. There is no food more locally produced or sustainable than breastmilk, and a breastfed child is less likely to suffer from gastroenteritis, respiratory and ear infections, diabetes, allergies and other illnesses. In areas with unsafe water a bottle-fed child is up to 25 times more likely to die as a result of diarrhoea. WHO estimates that 11.6% of under-5 deaths could be prevented by breastfeeding and that: *'Globally, breastfeeding has the potential to prevent about 800,000 under-five deaths per year if all children 0–23 months were optimally breastfed.* As a watch-dog organisation, we monitor compliance with the *International Code of Breast Milk Substitutes*, and subsequent relevant World Health Assembly resolutions and advocate conflict of interests safeguards to protect policy setting and implementation from undue influence.

IBFAN answers to Questions for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

- 1 How does the concentration of power in the hands of a relatively small number of corporations affect food sovereignty and the right to food in your country or region? Examples of how corporate-led food systems have negatively impacted the human rights of communities, workers, small-scale farmers and vulnerable groups.**

[Codex](#) Alimentarius Commission is the joint United Nations body created in 1963 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the FAO to develop food standards, guidelines and codes of practice. Codex is an important illustration of undue corporate influence on food systems and IBFAN has been attending Codex meetings since 1995 when the World Trade Organisation ([WTO](#)) was established and mandated to refer to Codex Standards in trade disputes. IBFAN has paid particular attention to the very first food system – and the impact of products marketed for the feeding of infants and young children.

Despite its dual mandate to protect consumers' health and ensure fair practices in the food trade, the lack of transparency and poor conflict of interest safeguards has allowed food and agri-pharma corporations to dominate Codex proceedings and promote poor quality evidence. This has led to the adoption of weak industry favourable standards that pose a threat to human health and have been used in [attempts to stop governments bringing in strong marketing controls that would protect health](#). [The Lancet has detailed how interventions made at the WTO](#) concerning commercial milk formula marketing, labelling or safety testing regulations of another member state, have highlighted *"the power of the commercial milk formula (CMF) industry to commodify the feeding of infants and young children; influence policy at both national and international levels in ways that grow and sustain CMF markets; and externalise the social, environmental, and economic costs of CMF."* The food industry often suggests that Codex standards are a 'regulatory ceiling' for trade purposes. While governments have the sovereign right to adopt any legislation they consider necessary to protect child health – as long as it does not violate international trade principles – the fear of triggering costly, time-consuming challenges at WTO and elsewhere has undoubtedly had a clear chilling effect on policy-making.ⁱ

Largely because of IBFAN's advocacy, the standards on foods for infants and young children adopted *after* 1995, all refer in some way to the [International Code, the Global Strategy and/or the subsequent WHA Resolutions](#) related to infant and young child feeding. Also the *Codex Code of Ethics for International Trade* also requires Member States to "...make sure that the international code of marketing of breast milk substitutes and relevant resolutions of the World Health Assembly (WHA) setting forth principles for the protection and promotion of breastfeeding be observed."

[CLICK here](#) for a compilation of IBFAN press releases that give examples of IBFAN's work at Codex.ⁱⁱ

2 What alternatives to corporate-controlled food systems are you promoting or supporting (e.g., agroecology, food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture)?

IBFAN contributed to the adoption of the [International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and the 2i World Health Assembly Resolutions](#) that seek to keep pace industry marketing tactics. IBFAN advocates that governments adopt these recommendations, as a minimum, in binding regulation. 144 countries have so far adopted laws that, to a varying extent, incorporate some of the WHO recommendations. When these laws include the clarifying and strengthening Resolutions and are well-monitored they have contributed to increased breastfeeding rates and the saving of millions of lives.

IBFAN works alongside the Civil Society Mechanism of the CFS and numerous NGOs to promote agro-ecology, food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, WHO's One Health approach and bio-diverse food systems. We highlight the risks of corporate-led strategies: ultra-processing of foods; mono-cropping; land and sea-grabbing etc. One of our primary concerns is that women, children are prioritised and the role of breastfeeding protected as the most climate-resilient environmentally sustainable first food system, that reduces greenhouse gas emissions. We also advocate for the prevention of prenatal and postnatal exposure to toxic chemicals from infant feeding products and packaging, plastics and endocrine disrupting chemicals, which impact on babies' immune, reproductive and endocrine systems.ⁱⁱⁱ

3 What barriers or threats do these alternative systems face from dominant corporate actors or state policies?

There are many strategies that corporations use to infiltrate civil society actions. Because of IBFAN's long experience in the protection of child health we advocate the need for strong funding and conflict of interest policies because these help ensure independence from corporate interests and freedom to speak out in the public and planetary interest. Some of the strategies used by the Baby feeding industry are outlined in this paper: [Interference in public health policy: examples of how the baby food industry uses tobacco industry tactics](#).^{iv} UNICEF's briefing: *Countering Industry Arguments against Code Implementation: Evidence and Rights-Based Responses*. gives more examples of the tactics commonly used.^v

4 What kind of legislation is needed in your country to limit the growing corporate concentration and power in food systems and allowing to hold corporations accountable for human rights violations?

See answer to Q4. IBFAN considers that there is a Human Rights Obligation for all governments to strictly regulate corporations.

Codex has recently been considering adopting a prioritization mechanism to guide Codex work – whether standards should be revised, revoked or started. IBFAN welcomes this move and is asking for the *negative impact* of Codex standards to be considered, not just the positive and for all its standards to be in line with [WHO recommendations](#). This is a fundamental challenge for Codex. The long shelf life needed for the global trade of foods encourages Ultra-Processing that has been shown to have a harmful impact on the environment and human health.^{vi} Governments should be alert to the harm that occurs when they fail to adequately address Conflicts of Interest and allow unrestricted promotion of plastic packaged, risky ultra-processed products.^{vii}

5 Experiences you have with lawsuits against corporations for their human rights violations in your food system.

- 2003, Successful legal Action against Wyeth/SMA. Wyeth (the parent company of SMA Nutrition) was found guilty on 6 separate counts for illegal advertising direct to consumers and fined £60,808 (including costs) - equivalent to three minutes sales for the company.^{viii}
- LATVIA Case. How different understanding of professional ethics led to a disquieting legal case between two groups of paediatricians^{ix}

6 Experiences within a social and solidarity economy?

IBFAN is a founder of the [Interagency Infant Feeding in Emergencies Core group](#). This inter-agency group, was set up in 1999 to ensure that coordinated emergency responses are appropriate and not influenced by commercial agendas or exploited to create new markets for risky products. The IFE meets monthly.

Conflicts-of-interest safeguards to safeguard public health policy setting. The need for sound information on infant and young child feeding is at the heart of the [International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes](#) and the [20 World Health Assembly Resolutions](#) that have been passed since 1981. WHA49.15 was the first Resolution to specifically call for Conflict of Interest Safeguards, and least 9 WHA resolutions have followed.

IBFAN is founding member of the [Conflicts of Interest Coalition](#) launched at the UN General Assembly on NCDs in 2011. The [Statement](#) is endorsed by 162 organisations representing over 2000 NGOs who endorsed it and have used it to inform their policies.

Transparency in EU baby-food regulations. In 2000, our exposé of undue corporate influence in the *EU's Scientific Committee for Food* (SCF), prompted the European Commission to bring in rules on transparency and Conflict of Interest. The SCF was closed down and replaced by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) with the aim of protecting EU scientific advice from commercial and political influence.^x Following this change there was a marked improvement in the stand taken by the EU on many issues (not all!).

7 Have you experienced or observed forms of 'controlled participation' where CSOs were invited to join a process in ways that undermined autonomy? If yes, please describe.

Yes. Over the years, IBFAN has many times been placed in difficult situations where we have come under pressure to join 'multi-stakeholder' partnerships involving health harming transnational corporations and philanthropies, to consider corporations as 'key stakeholders' in public affairs and to accept their increasing influence over public policy spaces and the framing of public agendas. IBFAN remains concerned about the implications for UN agencies and governments who seek to regulate corporations in the public interest and also for people's ability to claim their legitimate rights. Here are some examples:

- **Scaling up Nutrition (SUN).** The research by [FIAN International](#), [IBFAN](#) and the [Society for International Development](#) (SID) [When SUN casts a Shadow The human rights risks of multi-stakeholder partnerships: the case of Scaling up Nutrition \(SUN\)](#) examined this multi-stakeholder initiative that was founded in 2010 with a mission "to end malnutrition in all its forms". Using the right to adequate food and nutrition (RtAFN) legal framework, our study analyzed SUN's functioning at global level, as well as its influence and impacts at country level. The findings, based on primary data collected in **Uganda, Guatemala and India** and secondary sources suggested that rather than making meaningful changes to the lives of those most affected by hunger and malnutrition, SUN may have worsened their situation of vulnerability and marginalization while creating additional human rights risks. A key finding in the study was that SUN's 'top down' approach and its promotion of enhanced private sector influence over public affairs is undermining the efforts of those calling for effective conflict of interest regulations. The SUN Business Network (SBN) presented biofortification and market-led, product-based approaches as 'smart' investments. For the SBN global members, corporations who market [ultra-processed](#)

[snacks and products](#), SUN's benign humanitarian image has been a useful diversionary tactic that has allowed them to be seen as trusted 'partners' while they change national and [global trade policies](#) in their favour – strategies that directly conflict with SUN's stated aim to end malnutrition in all its forms.

- In May 2017 IBFAN came under considerable pressure to join a new initiative, a **Global Monitoring Mechanism (GMM) proposed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF)** This initiative disregarded basic principles that ensure the independence, integrity and credibility of public health monitoring policy making. For more see [IBFAN's Note of dissent to the Gates Monitoring Mechanism \(May 2017\)](#) and [Click here](#)
- [IBFAN's Counter-Call to WHO and UNICEF to STOP 10 year-licence to harm children \(July and Nov 2020\). Baby Food industry refuses to follow the Code – industry-inspired Call to Action is concluded \(March 23 2021\)](#)
- [Civil Society abandons Platform](#) (27/07/2021) [Closure of EU Platform for Action on Diet Physical Activity and Health](#)
- [Why the Nutrition for Growth \(N4G\) Initiative is a threat to child health \(May 2021\).](#)

8 How are you navigating the shrinking political space for food sovereignty within international forums like the FAO or the CFS?

IBFAN shares the concerns of the [Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism](#) (CSM) about the shrinking political space for food sovereignty within international forums like the FAO or the CFS. We have spoken about her concerns several times at CFS and took part in the negotiations on the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition in 2021.^{xi xii}

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ⁱ *The political economy of infant and young child feeding: confronting corporate power, overcoming structural barriers, and accelerating progress* Phillip Baker, PhD^a et al. Lancet, [Volume 401, Issue 10375](#) P503-524 February 11, 2023

ⁱⁱ *Codex opens the door to exploitation of emergencies – Australian example. Will Codex open the door to exploitation of food aid in emergencies and more greenwashing?* [2024: Press Release: EU and Switzerland try to tackle sweetness – the UK wary of 'probiotic' claims. Codex starts new work on baby foods](#) May 2024 Conflicts of Interest at the heart of Codex [Industry funding channelled through health professional bodies, such as ESPGHAN, weaken Codex standards](#) [2023: Codex green-lights wasteful, sweetened Ultra-Processed drinks for older babies](#) [May 2023 Codex labelling: will 'sustainability' claims boost trade of harmful products?](#) [2023: After 10 years of struggle, Codex puts child health before trade at last](#) [2021: Codex Commission unable to reach Consensus on growth hormone](#) [2019 CODEX: Exporting countries put trade before the health of the planet and children](#) [2019: IBFAN at the Codex Labelling: Bio-fortification, Cross Branding, front of pack labelling](#) [2018 Conflicts of Interest and US pressure at the Codex meeting in Rome](#) [2016 Global standard-setting committee puts child health before trade](#) 38th Codex Alimentarius Nutrition Committee, Hamburg, Germany. 7th December 2016 [Codex PR 2016](#) 2014 [Trade vs health – global meeting fails to safeguard infant and young child health](#) Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses Bali, Indonesia 24-28th November 2014 [Codex-Bali-PR-2014](#). 2011 The Business of malnutrition: breaking down trade rules to profit from the poor. Codex Nutrition Meeting, Bad Soden, Frankfurt, Germany 12 -18th November 2011 [Codex PR 2011](#) [2006. EU and US block Thailand's proposal to reduce sugar in baby foods](#) FAO/WHO Codex Nutrition Committee (CCFSNDU) Chiang Mai, Thailand, 3rd November 2006. [Codex PR 2006](#) 47th Codex Alimentarius Commission 25/11/2024 – 30/11/2024 | Geneva, Switzerland

ⁱⁱⁱ [IBFAN Health and Environmental Impacts COP27 – Can lessons be learned and the UPF trade controlled?](#)

[IBFAN COP 26 2021 Statement for COP26](#)

^{iv} [Interference in public health policy: examples of how the baby food industry uses tobacco industry tactics. World Nutrition, Vol 8 No 2 \(2017\)](#)

^v [Countering Industry Arguments Against Code Implementation: Evidence and Rights-Based Responses Guidance for Advocates of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes](#) <https://www.globalbreastfeeding.org>

^{vi} *Nature Climate Change*, Ivanovich et al. further confirm in their [Analysis article](#) that global food consumption can add nearly 1 °C to warming by the end of this century, driven by foods that are high sources of methane, such as beef, dairy and rice.. *Modern food emissions. Nat. Clim. Chang.* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-023-01643-2>

^{vii} [IBFAN/ENCA comment on DRAFT STRATEGIC GOALS AND OUTCOME STATEMENTS FOR THE CODEX STRATEGIC PLAN 2026-2031, AS PROPOSED BY CCEXEC](#) IBFAN ENCA comments on the development of the Codex Strategic Plan 2026- 2031 – Part 1 – how Codex works as part of the multilateral system on food and trade

^{viii} [Judge convicts Wyeth/SMA of "cynical and deliberate breach of regulations"](#) <http://archive.babymilkaction.org/update/update33.html#1>

^{ix} <https://www.babymilkaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Latvian-case.pdf>

^x [Clamour for action to bolster Union scientists' credibility. European Voice. Renée Cordes, Jan 2000 vol 6.no.2](#)

^{xi} [Scientists bow to call for more transparency.](#) European Voice, Renée Cordes, 16-22 March, 2000, Vol 6, No 11.

^{xii} [The risks of Multi-stakeholderism, Committee on Food Security, Rome.](#) CFS 46 VI MULTISTAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS TO FINANCE AND IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE 2030 AGENDA. Patti Rundall, IBFAN. Statement from the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM), 46th Session, 14-18 October 2019, <https://www.babymilkaction.org/archives/22924>

^{xiii} <https://www.babymilkaction.org/archives/28207>