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# International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) is a Food Industry Lobby Group

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The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) is a corporate-funded nonprofit organization based in Washington DC, with 17 affiliated chapters around the world. ILSI describes itself as a group that conducts “science for the public good” and “improves human health and well-being and safeguards the environment.” However, investigations by academics, journalists and public interest researchers show that ILSI is a lobby group that protects the interests of the food industry, not public health.

## Recent news

- March 2022 study in Cambridge University Press found that 95% of the U.S. 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee had conflicting interests with the food, and/or pharmaceutical industries. Particular actors, including Kellogg, Abbott, Kraft, Mead Johnson, General Mills, Dannon, and the ILSI had connections with multiple members. “Trustworthy dietary guidelines result from a transparent, objective, and science-based, process,” the researchers wrote. The “significant and widespread” COI on the committee “prevent the DGA from achieving the recommended standard for transparency without mechanisms in place to make this information publicly available.”
- February 2022 study in Globalization and Health co-authored by U.S. Right to Know shows that food and chemical industry players view the International Food Information Council (IFIC) as “being central to promoting industry-favorable content in defense of products facing potentially negative press, such as aspartame...” The study describes IFIC as “a sister entity to ILSI. ILSI generates the scientific facts and IFIC communicates them to the media and public. See also, IFIC: How Big Food Spins Bad News.
- April 2021 study in Globalization and Health documents how ILSI plays a key role in helping the food industry shape scientific principles by promoting the acceptance of public-private partnerships and permissiveness about conflicts of interest.
- Coca-Cola has severed its longtime ties with ILSI. The move is “a blow to the powerful food organization known for its pro-sugar research and policies,” Bloomberg reported in January 2021.

- ILSI helped Coca-Cola Company shape obesity policy in China, according to a September 2020 study in the Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law by Harvard Professor Susan Greenhalgh. "Beneath ILSI's public narrative of unbiased science and no policy advocacy lay a maze of hidden channels companies used to advance their interests. Working through those channels, Coca Cola influenced China's science and policy making during every phase in the policy process, from framing the issues to drafting official policy," the paper concludes.
- Documents obtained by U.S. Right to Know add more evidence that ILSI is a food industry front group. A May 2020 study in Public Health Nutrition based on the documents reveal "a pattern of activity in which ILSI sought to exploit the credibility of scientists and academics to bolster industry positions and promote industry-devised content in its meetings, journal, and other activities." See coverage in The BMJ, Food and drink industry sought to influence scientists and academics, emails show (5.22.20)
- Corporate Accountability's April 2020 report examines how food and beverage corporations have leveraged ILSI to infiltrate the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, and cripple progress on nutrition policy around the globe. See coverage in The BMJ, Food and soft drink industry has too much influence over US dietary guidelines, report says (4.24.20)
- New York Times investigation by Andrew Jacobs reveals that a trustee of the industry-funded nonprofit ILSI advised the Indian government against going ahead with warning labels on unhealthy foods. The Times described ILSI as a "shadowy industry group" and "the most powerful food industry group you've never heard of." (9.16.19) The Times cited a June study in Globalization and Health co-authored by Gary Ruskin of U.S. Right to Know reporting that ILSI operates as a lobby arm for its food and pesticide industry funders.
- The New York Times revealed the undisclosed ILSI ties of Bradley C. Johnston, a co-author of five recent studies claiming red and processed meat don't pose significant health problems. Johnston used similar methods in an ILSI-funded study to claim sugar is not a problem. (10.4.19)
- Marion Nestle's Food Politics blog, ILSI: true colors revealed (10.3.19)

## ILSI ties to Coca-Cola

ILSI was founded in 1978 by Alex Malaspina, a former senior vice president at Coca-Cola who worked for Coke from 1969-2001. Coca-Cola has kept close ties with ILSI. Michael Ernest Knowles, Coca-Cola's VP of global scientific and regulatory affairs from 2008-2013, was president of ILSI from 2009-2011. In 2015, ILSI's president was Rhona Applebaum, who retired from her job as Coca-Cola's chief health and science officer (and from ILSI) in 2015 after the New York Times and Associated Press reported that Coke funded the nonprofit Global Energy Balance Network to help shift blame for obesity away from sugary drinks.

## Corporate funding

ILSI is funded by its corporate members and company supporters, including leading food and chemical companies. ILSI acknowledges receiving funding from industry but does not publicly disclose who donates or how much they contribute. Our research reveals:

- Corporate contributions to ILSI Global amounting to \$2.4 million in 2012. This included \$528,500 from CropLife International, a \$500,000 contribution from Monsanto and \$163,500 from Coca-Cola.
- A draft 2013 ILSI tax return shows ILSI received \$337,000 from Coca-Cola and more than \$100,000 each from Monsanto, Syngenta, Dow Agrisciences, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Bayer CropScience and BASF.

- A draft 2016 ILSI North America tax return shows a \$317,827 contribution from PepsiCo, contributions greater than \$200,000 from Mars, Coca-Cola, and Mondelez, and contributions greater than \$100,000 from General Mills, Nestle, Kellogg, Hershey, Kraft, Dr. Pepper, Snapple Group, Starbucks Coffee, Cargill, Unilever and Campbell Soup.

## Emails show how ILSI seeks to influence policy to promote industry views

A May 2020 study in Public Health Nutrition adds evidence that ILSI is a food industry front group. The study, based on documents obtained by U.S. Right to Know via state public records requests, reveals how ILSI promotes the interests of the food and agrichemical industries, including ILSI's role in defending controversial food ingredients and suppressing views that are unfavorable to industry; that corporations such as Coca-Cola can earmark contributions to ILSI for specific programs; and, how ILSI uses academics for their authority but allows industry hidden influence in their publications.

The study also reveals new details about which companies fund ILSI and its branches, with hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions documented from leading junk food, soda and chemical companies.

- Public Health Nutrition: Pushing partnerships: corporate influence on research and policy via the International Life Sciences Institute, by Sarah Steele, Gary Ruskin, David Stuckler (5.17.2020)
- The BMJ, Food and drink industry sought to influence scientists and academics, emails show, by Gareth Iacobucci (5.22.20)
- U.S. Right to Know press release: ILSI is a food industry front group, new study suggests

A June 2019 paper in Globalization and Health provides several examples of how ILSI advances the interests of the food industry, especially by promoting industry-friendly science and arguments to policymakers. The study is based on documents obtained by U.S. Right to Know via state public records laws.

The researchers concluded: "ILSI seeks to influence individuals, positions, and policy, both nationally and internationally, and its corporate members deploy it as a tool to promote their interests globally. Our analysis of ILSI serves as a caution to those involved in global health governance to be wary of putatively independent research groups, and to practice due diligence before relying upon their funded studies and/or engaging in relationship with such groups."

- Globalization and Health: Are industry-funded charities promoting advocacy-led studies or evidence based science? A case study of the International Life Sciences Institute, by Sarah Steele, Gary Ruskin, Lejla Sarcevic, Martin McKee, David Stuckler.
- Documents posted in the UCSF Food Industry Documents Archive in the U.S. Right to Know Food Industry Collection.



- New York Times: A Shadowy Industry Group Shapes Food Policy Around the World, by Andrew Jacobs (9.16.19)
- The BMJ: International Life Sciences Institute is a advocate for food and drink industry, say researchers, by Owen Dyer (6.4.19) and tweet from the BMJ
- The Guardian: Science institute that advised EU and UN ‘actually industry lobby group’, by Arthur Neslen (6.2.19)
- U.S. Right to Know news release: ILSI is a food industry lobby group not a public health group, study finds (6.2.19)
- El Poder del Consumidor news release: Revela investigación que institución científica internacional protege los intereses de Coca-Cola contra las políticas de salud pública (6.3.19)
- EcoWatch: Influential science group ILSI exposed as food industry lobby group, by Stacy Malkan (6.7.19)

## ILSI undermined obesity fight in China

In January 2019, two papers by Harvard Professor Susan Greenhalgh revealed ILSI’s powerful influence on the Chinese government on issues related to obesity. The papers document how Coca-Cola and other corporations worked through the China branch of ILSI to influence decades of Chinese science and public policy on obesity and diet-related illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes and hypertension. Read the papers:

- **Making China safe for Coke: How Coca-Cola shaped obesity science and policy in China**, by Susan Greenhalgh, BMJ (January 2019)
- **Soda industry influence on obesity science and policy in China**, by Susan Greenhalgh, Journal of Public Health Policy (January 2019)

ILSI is so well-placed in China that it operates from inside the government’s Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Beijing.

Professor Greenhalgh’s papers document how Coca-Cola and other Western food and beverage giants “helped shape decades of Chinese science and public policy on obesity and diet-related diseases” by operating through ILSI to cultivate key Chinese officials “in an effort to stave off the growing movement for food regulation and soda taxes that has been sweeping the west,” the New York Times reported.

- How Chummy Are Junk Food Giants and China’s Health Officials? They Share Offices, by Andrew Jacobs, New York Times (1.9.19)
- Study: Coca-Cola Shaped China’s Efforts To Fight Obesity, by Jonathan Lambert, NPR (1.10.19)
- The hidden power of corporations: A lesson from China, by Martin McKee, Sarah Steele, David Stuckler, BMJ (1.9.19)
- Food giants undermined obesity fight, scholar says, by Candace Choi, Associated Press (1.10.19)

## Additional academic research from U.S. Right to Know about ILSI

- **How food companies influence evidence and opinion – straight from the horse's mouth**, by Gary Sacks, Boyd Swinburn, Adrian Cameron, Gary Ruskin, Critical Public Health (9.13.17)
  - USRTK News Release: How the food industry sees science, public health and medical organizations (9.13.17)
- **Public Meets Private: Conversations Between Coca-Cola and the CDC**, Nason Maani Hessari, Gary Ruskin, Martin McKee, David Stucker, Milbank Quarterly (1.29.19)
  - USRTK News Release: Study Shows Coca-Cola's Efforts to Influence CDC on Diet and Obesity (1.29.19)

The UCSF Tobacco Industry Documents Archive has over 6,800 documents pertaining to ILSI.

## ILSI sugar study “right out of the tobacco industry’s playbook”

Public health experts denounced an ILSI-funded sugar study published in a prominent medical journal in 2016 that was a “scathing attack on global health advice to eat less sugar,” reported Anahad O’Connor in The New York Times. The ILSI-funded study argued that warnings to cut sugar are based on weak evidence and cannot be trusted.

The Times story quoted Marion Nestle, a professor at New York University who studies conflicts of interest in nutrition research, on the ILSI study: “This comes right out of the tobacco industry’s playbook: cast doubt on the science,” Nestle said. “This is a classic example of how industry funding biases opinion. It’s shameful.”

## Tobacco companies used ILSI to thwart policy

A July 2000 report by an independent committee of the World Health Organization outlined a number of ways in which the tobacco industry attempted to undermine WHO tobacco control efforts, including using scientific groups to influence WHO’s decision-making and to manipulate scientific debate surrounding the health effects of tobacco. ILSI played a key role in these efforts, according to a case study on ILSI that accompanied the report. “Findings indicate that ILSI was used by certain tobacco companies to thwart tobacco control policies. Senior office bearers in ILSI were directly involved in these actions,” according to the case study. See:

- **The Tobacco Industry and Scientific Groups ILSI: A Case Study**, WHO Tobacco Free Initiative (Feb. 2001)
- **Tobacco Company Strategies to Undermine Tobacco Control Activities at the World Health Organization**, Report of the Committee of Experts on Tobacco Industry Documents (July 2000)

The UCSF Tobacco Industry Documents Archive has more than 6,800 documents pertaining to ILSI.

## ILSI leaders helped defend glyphosate as chairs of key panel

In May 2016, ILSI came under scrutiny after revelations that the vice president of ILSI Europe, Professor Alan Boobis, was also chairman of a UN panel that found Monsanto’s chemical glyphosate was unlikely to pose a cancer risk through diet. The co-chair of the UN Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR), Professor Angelo Moretto, was a board member of ILSI’s Health and Environment Services Institute. Neither of the JMPR chairs declared their ILSI leadership roles as conflicts of interest, despite the significant financial contributions ILSI has received from Monsanto and the pesticide industry trade group. See:

- UN/WHO panel in conflict of interest row over glyphosate cancer risk, The Guardian (5.17.16)
- Möglicher Interessenskonflikt bei Pflanzenschutzmittel-Bewertung, Die Zeit (5.18.16)

- Conflict of interest concerns cloud meeting as international experts review herbicide risks, USRTK (5.12.16)

## **ILSI's cozy ties at U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

In June 2016, U.S. Right to Know reported that Dr. Barbara Bowman, director of a CDC division charged with preventing heart disease and stroke, tried to help ILSI's founder Alex Malaspina influence World Health Organization officials to back off policies to reduce sugar consumption. Bowman suggested people and groups for Malaspina to talk to, and solicited his comments on some CDC summaries of reports, the emails show. (Bowman stepped down after our first article was published reporting on these ties.)

This January 2019 study in the Milbank Quarterly describes key emails of Malaspina cozying up to Dr. Bowman. For more reporting on this topic, see:

- Coke and CDC, Atlanta icons, share cozy relationship, emails show, by Alan Judd, Atlanta Journal Constitution (2.6.19)
- What is Going on at the CDC? Health Agency Ethics Need Scrutiny, by Carey Gillam, The Hill (8.27.2016)
- More Coca-Cola Ties Seen Inside U.S. Centers for Disease Control, by Carey Gillam, Huffington Post (8.1.2016)
- CDC Official Exits Agency After Coca-Cola Connections Come to Light, by Carey Gillam, Huffington Post (12.6.2017)
- Beverage Industry Finds Friend Inside U.S. Health Agency, by Carey Gillam, Huffington Post (6.28.2016)
- UCSD Hires Coke-Funded Researcher, by Morgan Cook, San Diego Union-Tribune (9.29.2016)

## **ILSI influence on the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee**

A report by the nonprofit group Corporate Accountability documents how ILSI has major influence on U.S. dietary guidelines via its infiltration of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. The report examines the pervasive political interference of food and beverage transnationals like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Nestlé, and PepsiCo, and how these corporations have leveraged the International Life Sciences Institute to cripple progress on nutrition policy across the globe.

- Partnership for an Unhealthy Planet: How big business interferes with global health policy and science, Corporate Accountability (April 2020)
- See coverage in The BMJ, Food and soft drink industry has too much influence over US dietary guidelines, report says (4.24.20)

## **ILSI influence in India**

The New York Times reported on ILSI's influence in India in its article titled, "A Shadowy Industry Group Shapes Food Policy Around the World."

ILSI has close ties to some Indian government officials and, as in China, the nonprofit has pushed similar messaging and policy proposals as Coca-Cola – downplaying the role of sugar and diet as a cause of obesity, and promoting increased physical activity as the solution, according to the India Resource Center.

Members of ILSI India's board of trustees include Coca-Cola India's director of regulatory affairs and representatives from Nestlé and Ajinomoto, a food additive company, along with government officials who serve on scientific panels that are tasked with deciding about food safety issues.

## Longstanding concerns about ILSI

ILSI insists it is not an industry lobby group, but concerns and complaints are longstanding about the group's pro-industry stances and conflicts of interest among the organization's leaders. See, for example:

Untangle food industry influences, Nature Medicine (2019)

Food agency denies conflict-of-interest claim. But accusations of industry ties may taint European body's reputation, Nature (2010)

Big Food Vs. Tim Noakes: The Final Crusade, Keep Fitness Legal, by Russ Greene (1.5.17)

Real Food on Trial, by Dr. Tim Noakes and Marika Sboros (Columbus Publishing 2019). The book describes "the unprecedented prosecution and persecution of Professor Tim Noakes, a distinguished scientist and medical doctor, in a multimillion rand case that stretched over more than four years. All for a single tweet giving his opinion on nutrition."

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Ajinomoto, Alan Boobis, Alex Malaspina, Angelo Moretto, Barbara Bowman, BASF, Bayer, Bradley C. Johnston, CDC, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, China, Coca-Cola, conflict of interest, Corporate Accountability, corporate funding, Dow, Global Energy Balance Network, glyphosate, ILSI, International Life Sciences Institute, JMPR, Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues, Marion Nestle, Michael Ernest Knowles, Monsanto, Nestle, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Rhona Applebaum, RoundUp, Syngenta, tobacco, U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, World Health Organization



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