



# PARTNERSHIP FOR AN UNHEALTHY PLANET:

How big business interferes with global health policy and science



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### 4 Introduction

- 4 Key findings
- 6 ILSI: A partnership for an unhealthy planet

### 6 Who is writing the American diet?

- 6 Food industry looms larger than previously known
- 6 Overview of the dietary guidelines for Americans
- 7 DGAC: In bed with (and breaking the law for?) Big Food

### 8 ILSI's troubling ties to past dietary guidelines

- 10 ILSI's incredible mark on 2020 DGAC
- 10 ILSI and its baby food benefactors in the driver's seat for new maternal and early childhood guidelines?

### 12 (ILSI's) 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee

- 14 Coca-Cola's unhelpful, unhealthful input on dietary guidelines
- 14 ILSI North America violates its own first principle
- 15 ILSI and Oxford's peer-reviewed junk science
- 16 Notable examples of ILSI Nutrition Reviews' difficulty with disclosure
- 16 ILSI's difficulty disclosing its role in research

### 17 Upending health across the globe

### 22 Conclusion: It's time to put ILSI and its partnerships on ice

- 23 Recommendations for corporations
- 23 Recommendations for governments
- 23 Recommendations for academic institutions

### 24 Endnotes

### 30 Bibliography

### 35 Acknowledgements

# Introduction: A partnership for an unhealthy planet

Political interference by food and beverage transnationals like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Nestlé, and PepsiCo is pervasive.<sup>1</sup>

You can see the result in today's staggering rates of diet-related disease. You can see it in the effort required to ensure the most basic rights for workers. And you can see it the industry's impunity to pollute.

No one is more impacted by the industry's hand in politics than those in Global South countries ("expansion markets" in industry parlance), low-income communities, and communities of color. It's here that the rates of diet-related disease are the highest and most rapidly accelerating.<sup>2</sup> It's here that tens of millions of people are exploited to maximize profits for executives and investors. It's here that people are most deeply burdened with "externalities" like mountains of plastic waste and toxic pesticide exposure.<sup>3,4</sup>

And while Big Food has received applause for being more transparent about its political giving and drawing-down its lobbying (in some rare cases), the scale of the reform doesn't begin to address the problem. For the purpose of this report, Coca-Cola and other beverage companies are included in the scope of the term "Big Food." Coca-Cola, for instance, has responded to public pressure by disclosing its national political and charitable giving in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> What about its local, state, and international giving? It does, after all, do business in another 199 countries.<sup>6</sup> McDonald's, similarly, responded to pressure by Corporate Accountability and its allies, such as Fight for \$15, that it would stop funding the National Restaurant Association (NRA) to oppose minimum wage increases.<sup>7,8</sup> It begs the question how tightly McDonald's will be policing as much. The burger giant continues to lavish money on a trade group that opposes paid sick leave, anti-discrimination policies, and other worker rights at its behest.

What's more, recent exposés have painted a very damning picture of how Coca-Cola and its "charity" of

choice, International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), are crippling progress on nutrition policy across the globe. In China, ILSI shares an office with and informs public health policy from the government's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Beijing.<sup>9</sup> In India, experts with ILSI ties recently delayed warning labels for unhealthy food.<sup>10</sup> In Brazil, ILSI now occupies seats on official food and nutrition panels previously reserved for university researchers.<sup>11</sup>

**And this is just the tip of the iceberg, as our report finds. "Partnership for an Unhealthy Planet" takes a critical look at how Big Food, through one of its most favored instruments, is shaping public health policy and science the world over at an overwhelming cost to public health and the integrity of government and academic institutions.**

In it, we examine ILSI's revolving doors and conflicts of interest in some of the most critical government policy processes globally from the formulation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) to the updating of national food composition databases. The report also chronicles the front group's deep connections with industry, its ties to research it has helped produce, and to individuals it has relationships with. The picture it paints makes a compelling case for Big Food to abandon ILSI and similar front groups in the interest not only of public health, but also a less deceitful relationship with its investors. After all, investors should be alarmed that such corporate political chicanery is required to keep their investments profitable.

## KEY FINDINGS

The public's understanding of what the New York Times dubs a "shadowy industry group" is only mounting. Our most recent findings add but another important page to the case for corporations, governments, and academia to part ways with ILSI. Among them, Corporate Accountability has found:

- More than half of those appointed to the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) have ties to ILSI.
- The chairs and vice chairs of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee, as well as of the Birth to 24 Months Subcommittee, are ILSI-affiliated

scientists with ties to food and beverage transnationals such as The Dannon Company, Gerber, and Mead Johnson.<sup>12,13,14,15,16,17</sup>

- ILSI’s *Nutrition Reviews* journal doesn’t always disclose ILSI affiliations and conflicts of interests.
- Prior research found that close to 40 percent of ILSI North America’s (ILSI NA) 2013-2017 publications did not have any disclosure statement whatsoever, despite having ILSI support or funding.<sup>18</sup> We found buried deeper in this research that even of the publications within the 60 percent with a disclosure statement, “no conflict of interest” was sometimes declared despite ILSI’s support or funding.
- ILSI NA’s current Board of Trustees violates Principle 1 of its Conflict of Interest Policy,<sup>19</sup> with more than 50 percent of its board holding an affiliation with the private sector.

- Far from dismantling ILSI Mexico after it violated the group’s code of ethics under one Coca-Cola executive’s leadership and floundered under a second Coca-Cola executive’s leadership, it was absorbed in 2019 by ILSI Mesoamerica which is under yet another Coca-Cola executive’s leadership.<sup>20</sup>
- Despite ILSI’s claim that it doesn’t lobby, it offered direct guidance to the Argentine government to update its National Food Composition Database.<sup>21</sup>
- ILSI India produced a study in “partnership” with government research institutions that systematically disparages and misrepresents the health effects of traditional foods, instead of focusing primarily on its benefactors’ products like soda and processed foods and their detrimental impact on public health.<sup>22</sup>



No matter whether these findings have been hiding in plain view or deliberately obscured, they paint a damning picture of an institution deeply disconnected from its stated mission and standards. Of a group intent on redirecting and mischaracterizing science to protect its industry backers. Of a group so deeply insinuated into policymaking that it makes revolving doors appear simply a matter of course.

### **ILSI: A PARTNERSHIP FOR AN UNHEALTHY PLANET**

ILSI was founded in 1978 by former Coca-Cola executive Dr. Alex Malaspina<sup>23</sup> as an industry-sponsored “non-profit, worldwide organization whose mission is to provide science that improves human health and well-being and safeguards the environment.”<sup>24</sup>

Given the organization’s historic membership is a who’s who of junk food brands,<sup>25</sup> pesticide manufacturers,<sup>26</sup> and even tobacco corporations,<sup>27</sup> you’d be right to question the authenticity of ILSI’s aspiration.

From the beginning, ILSI has boasted about “partnerships” with academic institutions and government agencies that ensure safeguards against conflict of interest and undue industry influence.<sup>28</sup> But the partnerships even more core to the lobby group are the ones it has forged among food and beverage transnationals to a) promote unhealthy products and b) shield Big Food and its products from liability.

That’s why in 1985, ILSI created another pivotal partnership and joined forces with the Nutrition Foundation.<sup>29</sup> The Nutrition Foundation was ILSI 1.0, as it was founded in 1941 by a similar group of food and beverage industry players like Coca-Cola, General Mills, H.J. Heinz, and “other corporate giants to publicize the food industry’s ‘concern’ for good health and nutritional food.”<sup>30</sup> Their forces combined, the resulting ILSI NA has consolidated industry resources and focused Big Business’s influence over academia and public policymaking.<sup>31</sup>

Today, ILSI has 16 affiliates worldwide, including the ILSI Research Foundation, with 103 paid employees.<sup>32</sup> In 2019 alone, it created more than 150 workshops and 70 scientific publications. Some of the world’s largest food, beverage, agriculture, chemical, and pharmaceutical corporations fund it

and their executives hold influential roles within each affiliate.<sup>33,34,35</sup> And despite mounting criticism of this all-too-powerful industry lobby group and having lost its special access to World Health Organization governing bodies in 2015,<sup>36</sup> ILSI continues to hold lavish annual meetings. It also continues to regularly convene academics and public officials in its effort to shape a regulatory landscape that is favorable to its corporate backers.

Even in times of crisis, such as today’s COVID-19 pandemic, ILSI’s backers feel no scruples lobbying for the bottom line. In India, despite potential consequences to the health and well-being of workers and the community, corporations including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Nestlé, have submitted letters to the government requesting food and beverage manufacturing be exempt from the lockdown, and be considered an “essential service.”<sup>37</sup> Not providing immune-suppressing sugar-sweetened beverages<sup>38,39</sup> during this time may also prove the more essential service these corporations can provide in this time and beyond.

## **Who is writing the American diet?**

### **FOOD INDUSTRY LOOMS LARGER THAN PREVIOUSLY KNOWN**

Seventy-five percent of the individuals involved in formulating the U.S. government’s official dietary guidance have food industry ties.<sup>40</sup> Fifty-five percent have ties to ILSI,<sup>41</sup> which was founded by a former Coca-Cola executive and is funded by Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, McDonald’s, General Mills, Cargill, Monsanto, the National Dairy Council, the International Tree Nut Council and a host of other global purveyors of junk food and drink.<sup>42</sup> [See **ILSI’s Incredible Mark on the 2020 DGAC** for further analysis].

### **OVERVIEW OF THE DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR AMERICANS**

Every five years, the U.S. federal government issues the “nation’s go-to source for nutrition advice,” the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA).<sup>43,44</sup>

It'd be difficult to overstate the importance of these recommendations to the public's health and well-being. They help direct what more than 30 million schoolchildren eat each school day.<sup>45</sup> They are used to inform the food and nutritional education for about half of all new mothers and infants receive.<sup>46</sup> And they also instruct the types of meals and nutrition advice the federal government provides to seniors, veterans, and a host of other beneficiaries.

But the DGA's mandate is even broader. It aims to promote health, prevent chronic disease, and help *all* U.S. residents reach and maintain a healthy weight.<sup>47</sup> For this reason, the latest guidelines are intended to reflect the most recent research in nutrition science, as well as to assist public health and nutrition professionals, policy makers, advocates, and the U.S. public in making healthy nutrition choices.<sup>48</sup> And from the very beginnings of the guidelines in 1980, researchers have suggested a causal relationship between these guidelines and the health of the U.S. public.<sup>49</sup>



## THE DGAC: IN BED WITH (AND BREAKING THE LAW FOR?) BIG FOOD

Given what's at stake in drafting and updating the DGAs, it's easy to understand why Congress directed the formation of a Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) of external experts to review scientific evidence and recommend updates every five years...and made the Committee subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).<sup>50</sup>

Under FACA the DGAC's advice is required to be objective and accessible to the public and effort must be taken "to assure that the advice and recommendations of the advisory committee [in this case DGAC] will not be inappropriately influenced by the appointing authority or by any special interest, but will instead be the result of the advisory committee's independent judgment."<sup>51,52</sup> According to the FACA, the agencies must also ensure the membership of a federal advisory committee is "fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented and the functions to be

performed by the advisory committee."<sup>53</sup>

Yet, the DGAC has had deep ties to industry for decades. New York University Professor Marion Nestle's 2018 book "Unsavory Truth" provides a snapshot of the DGAC's gradual distancing from FACA standards. She stated that "in 1995 when I was on the DGAC, only three of eleven [members] had ties to food companies, but the balance soon shifted to seven of eleven members in 2000, eleven of thirteen in 2005, and nine of thirteen in 2010."<sup>54</sup>

What's more, despite considering 150-200 candidates to serve on the DGAC during the last three updates to the nation's dietary guidelines,<sup>55</sup> the Committee's composition has continued to slant heavily toward those with deep ties to food and beverage transnationals, trade associations like the American Beverage Association (ABA), and industry front groups like ILSI.<sup>56</sup>

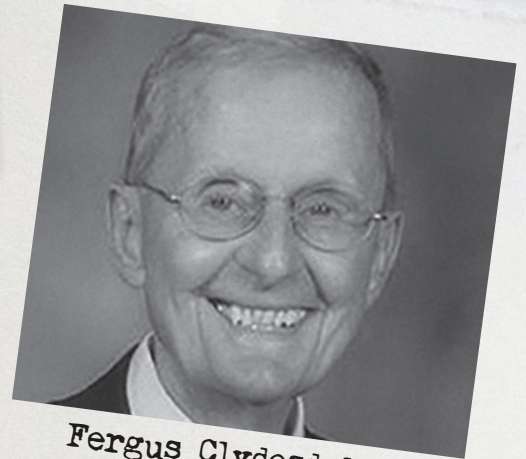
## ILSI's troubling ties to past diet guidelines

While the industry's overall influence on the DGACs is concerning to say the least, ILSI's connections alone should be cause for alarm. Since at least 2000, the majority of the DGAC's formed have had members that enjoyed close ties to ILSI.



**Johanna Dwyer**

In the late 1970s, ILSI NA (then the "ILSI-Nutrition Foundation") granted her a Future Leaders Award to fund her salary and research.<sup>57</sup> In 1995, Dwyer disclosed that she was a contributing editor for ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews*, just a few years prior to her appointment to the 2000 DGAC.<sup>58</sup> She has since served as an ILSI trustee,<sup>59</sup> received honoraria or served as an advisor to Conagra Foods, the Mushroom Council, and McCormick and Company's Health Science Institute, and consulted for Nestlé.<sup>60</sup> She was a scientific advisor for ILSI NA's Scientific Integrity Working Group,<sup>61</sup> and is currently an advisor for the Bioactives committee and Low-Calorie Sweeteners committee.<sup>62,63</sup>



**Fergus Clydesdale**

When Clydesdale was appointed to the 2003 DGAC, he was chair of ILSI's Board of Directors.<sup>64</sup> Prior, he held stock and consulted for several food-related corporations<sup>65</sup> and worked closely with the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), known best for taking industry money to downplay the risk of trans fat, tobacco, and toxic chemicals.<sup>66,67</sup> In an ironic twist, he would later go on to be a member of ILSI NA's Conflict of Interest Committee<sup>68</sup> and ILSI's Scientific Integrity Working Group,<sup>69</sup> and he continues to be a member of ILSI NA's Board of Trustees.<sup>70,71</sup> According to his resume published on the University of Massachusetts Amherst's website, in the past, Clydesdale received funding from the Coca-Cola Foundation on Food Science/Policy Consumer Acceptance.





**Connie Weaver**

Prior to serving on the DGAC in the early 2000s, Weaver was a "Kraft Research Fellow" and a former ILSI NA board member.<sup>72</sup> In 2015, she was a scientific advisor for ILSI's Scientific Integrity Working Group.<sup>73</sup> In 2017, she took ILSI money to conduct a study on youth sodium intake that ended disastrously and was terminated "amid claims of sexual abuse and out-of-control youth test subjects."<sup>74</sup> Despite the troubling allegations, Weaver has continued as the Co-Chair of ILSI NA's 2019 Board of Trustees<sup>75</sup> and remained the Symposium Chair of ILSI's 2020 Annual Meeting.<sup>76</sup>



**Christine Williams**

While a member of the 2009 DGAC, she endorsed ILSI Research Foundation's "Take Ten" program and co-authored an article funded by General Mills (vis à vis ILSI) that promoted physical activity in preschool.<sup>77</sup> While objectively important to encourage physical activity, initiatives like "Take Ten" and Coca-Cola's "Global Energy Balance Network" and studies like Williams' have endeavored to shift blame for diet-related disease from junk food to a lack of activity.<sup>78</sup>



## ILSI'S INCREDIBLE MARK ON THE 2020 DGAC

As soon as the members of the 2020 DGAC were announced on February 21, 2019, it was clear the Committee would again enjoy deep ties to the food and beverage industry. So much for the balance and objectivity prescribed by law. According to *The American Prospect*, "15 of the 20 advisory committee members have direct industry ties or nominations from industry-supported groups or glowing public praise from industry-backed groups."<sup>79</sup>

And you read that right, industry-supported trade groups in fact nominate members to the Committee. Nine of the 20 members were nominated by the American Society for Nutrition (ASN), which has 32 corporations including PepsiCo, Nestlé, Kellogg's, General Mills, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the Sugar Association, and the National Dairy Council as "sustaining partners."<sup>80</sup> Its nominees, unsurprisingly, boasted significant ties with transnational food and beverage corporations.<sup>81</sup>

Other nominators to the 2020 DGAC include the American Beverage Association, SNAC International (the global trade association for the snack food industry), and the Grocery Manufacturers Association (now the Consumer Brands Association).<sup>82</sup> But one industry-backed group seems to enjoy influence above and beyond the rest: ILSI.

ILSI itself claims it has formal ties to a quarter of the 2020 DGAC.<sup>83</sup> The committee chair is a government liaison of ILSI NA. And the vice chair, is the president of the board of industry's Global Child Nutrition Foundation which shares benefactors like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, General Mills, and Burger King with ILSI. The industry connections of these and other ILSI nominees are vast and have been investigated by *The American Prospect* and *Sensible Safeguards* at length.<sup>84,85</sup> But prior analysis, unfortunately, only begins to tell the story of ILSI's influence, in particular, over the 2020 DGAC.

Corporate Accountability's deeper investigation has found that more than half of the 2020 DGAC have some connection to industry's preferred trade group for influencing nutrition science and policy. And, perhaps most concerning, ILSI is particularly well-

poised to influence new guidelines for pregnant women and infants on behalf of some of the world's biggest infant formula and toddler food brands.

## ILSI AND ITS BABY FOOD BENEFACTORS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT FOR NEW MATERNAL AND EARLY CHILDHOOD GUIDELINES?

For the first time in history, the 2020 DGAC will convene and discuss recommendations for pregnant women and children from birth to 24 months.<sup>86</sup> Given the fact that the transition from breastfeeding or infant formula to the family diet is critical to establishing a healthy diet for children,<sup>87</sup> the recommendations concluded in the 2020-2025 DGA will affect the wellbeing and diet of millions of pregnant women and children across America. This has led to the formation of the Birth to 24 Months (B-24) Subcommittee and the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee, both chaired by individuals affiliated with ILSI.<sup>88</sup>

Needless to say, this is concerning for a number of reasons. First, historic ILSI-backers like Nestlé have a long history of aggressively marketing infant formula and perpetuating the myth that it is more beneficial than breast milk.<sup>89</sup> Its actions and the global infant deaths that resulted were so egregious it prompted a WHO International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes in 1981 that Nestlé and its competitors continue to violate.<sup>90,91</sup> Second, ILSI-backers like Dannon are major manufacturers of toddler milk and other milk-based drinks for infants and toddlers that are laden with added sugar, while providing no unique nutrition value in comparison even to cow's milk.<sup>92</sup>

Yet the Chair of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee, Sharon M. Donovan, is a member of the Dannon Scientific Advisory Board, who co-authored a Dannon-sponsored article published on ILSI *Nutrition Reviews* called "The Role of Yogurt in Improving the Quality of the American Diet and Meeting Dietary Guidelines."<sup>93</sup> In 2016, Donovan submitted a financial disclosure summarizing her affiliations with Mead Johnson Nutrition, Nestlé, Arla Foods International, Danone and The Dannon Company.<sup>94</sup> In 2019, as the associate editor of ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews* she published another Dannon-sponsored article on ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews* to promote yogurt for infants and

babies.<sup>95,96</sup>

But that's not all. Ronald Kleinman, current ILSI NA trustee member and the Chair/Vice Chair Rep of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee and the Birth to 24 Months Subcommittee,<sup>97</sup> served as a paid expert witness for Gerber, when it was sued for deceptive marketing.<sup>98</sup> He also served as Chair of the Mead Johnson Pediatric Nutrition Iron Expert Panel.<sup>99</sup>

# (ILSI's) 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee

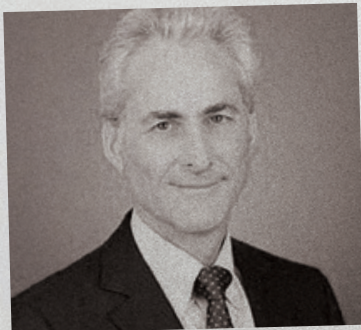
Though ILSI only claims ties to a quarter of the DGAC—which is concerning enough—11 out of 20 advisors are, in fact, somehow connected to the industry lobby group.



**Barbara Schneeman**  
Chair. Chair/Vice Chair Rep of the Dietary Patterns Subcommittee and the Beverages and Added Sugars Subcommittee.<sup>100</sup> University of California, Davis.<sup>101</sup> Former ILSI NA trustee.<sup>102</sup> Past ILSI grantee.<sup>103</sup> Current government liaison for ILSI NA's Gut Microbiome committee.<sup>104</sup> Past president of the Dannon Institute.<sup>105</sup>



**Ronald Kleinman**  
Vice Chair. Chair/Vice Chair Rep of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee and the Birth to 24 Months Subcommittee.<sup>106</sup> Harvard.<sup>107</sup> Current ILSI Research Foundation trustee.<sup>108</sup> President of food and beverage industry's Global Children Nutrition Foundation.<sup>109</sup> Has consulted with Burger King and General Mills.<sup>110</sup> Was sponsored by Coca-Cola in 2010 to tell dieticians that Coca-Cola ingredients are safe.<sup>111,112</sup> Has associations with Mead Johnson and Gerber.<sup>113,114</sup>



**Richard Mattes**  
Member of the Beverages and Added Sugars Subcommittee and the Frequency of Eating Subcommittee.<sup>132</sup> Purdue University.<sup>133</sup> Presented at ILSI Brazil's "XI News in Food Safety" conference<sup>134</sup> and co-authored a technical report summarizing a workshop convened by ILSI Europe titled "Dietary Sweetness: Is it an Issue?"<sup>1135</sup>



**Rachel Novotny**  
Member of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee and the Beverages and Added Sugars Subcommittee.<sup>136</sup> University of Hawaii.<sup>137</sup> Current associate editor at ILSI *Nutrition Reviews*.<sup>138</sup>



**Kathryn (Kay) Dewey**  
Chair of the Birth to 24 Months Subcommittee, Member of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee.<sup>139</sup> University of California, Davis.<sup>140</sup> Co-authored a study sponsored by the Nestlé Foundation and ILSI vis à vis USAID.<sup>141</sup>



**Sharon Donovan**

Chair of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee.<sup>115</sup> University of Illinois, Urbana.<sup>116</sup> Former ILSI NA scientific advisor<sup>117</sup> and "Future Leader Award" winner.<sup>118</sup> Current associate editor of ILSI *Nutrition Reviews*.<sup>119</sup> Dannon Company advisor and author of industry-sponsored studies on yogurt.<sup>120,121</sup> Has financial ties with Nestlé, Mead Johnson, Arla Foods International and Danone.<sup>122</sup>



**Regan Bailey**

Chair of the Data Analysis and Food Pattern Modeling - Cross-Cutting Working Group. Member of the Dietary Fats and Seafood Subcommittee.<sup>123</sup> Purdue University.<sup>124</sup> Current ILSI NA trustee member.<sup>125</sup> Former ILSI NA government liaison and Fortification Committee member.<sup>126</sup> Member of Dannon Nutrition Alumni Association.<sup>127</sup>



**Steven Heymsfield**

Chair of the Frequency of Eating Subcommittee, Member of the Dietary Patterns Subcommittee.<sup>128</sup> Louisiana State University.<sup>129</sup> Received ILSI NA funding for an article on "energy balance."<sup>130</sup> Current president of the Obesity Society, which receives funding from Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and other junk food corporations.<sup>131</sup>



**Heather Leidy**

Member of the Beverages and Added Sugars Subcommittee and the Frequency of Eating Subcommittee.<sup>142</sup> University of Texas, Austin.<sup>143</sup> Past speaker at ILSI NA annual meeting.<sup>144</sup> Served on steering committee of Protein Summit, sponsored by the National Pork Board, the Beef Checkoff, and other trade associations.<sup>145</sup> Co-authored a paper on "breakfast skipping adolescents," sponsored by The Pork Checkoff, but declared no conflict of interest.<sup>146</sup>



**Carol J. Boushey**

Chair of the Dietary Patterns Subcommittee, Member of the Frequency of Eating Subcommittee.<sup>147</sup> University of Hawaii.<sup>148</sup> Represented ILSI at the International Congress of Nutrition.<sup>149,150</sup> Presented at ILSI's Tech Summit Conference.<sup>151</sup>



**Teresa Davis**

Member of the Birth to 24 Months Subcommittee and the Data Analysis and Food Pattern Modeling - Cross-Cutting Working Group.<sup>152</sup> Baylor University.<sup>153</sup> Former ILSI NA scientific advisor.<sup>154</sup> Presented at ILSI NA's 2016 Mid-year Meeting.<sup>155</sup>

## COCA-COLA'S UNHELPFUL, UNHEALTHFUL INPUT ON DIETARY GUIDELINES

Were it not enough that the Coca-Cola-funded American Beverage Association,<sup>156</sup> Grocery Manufacturers Association, now Consumer Brands Association,<sup>157,158</sup> and ILSI nominate candidates to the DGAC—and individuals with ties to ILSI alone make up the majority of the 2020 Committee—the world's largest manufacturer of sugar-sweetened beverages felt the need to submit its own comment on the guidelines.

Not surprisingly, the comment is a case study in manipulating and misinterpreting science to justify a place for Coca-Cola's nutritionally-void product line in the American diet...and a seat for junk food corporations in setting food and nutrition policy.<sup>159</sup>

Despite Coca-Cola's claim to base their recommendations on what it is calling "existing science" in its comment, a pattern of problematic citations and skewing of relevant findings is prevalent. For example, in Section III: Detailed Beverage Guidance, Coca-Cola states that "unsweetened carbonated and flavored water offer an additional appealing, calorie-free alternative to still water while providing the same hydrating effect."<sup>160</sup> To justify as much, Coca-Cola cites the Scientific Report of the 2015 DGAC and the 2015-2020 DGA to support this claim. In reality, the Scientific Report argues that "added sugars should be reduced in the diet and not replaced with low-calorie sweeteners, but rather with healthy options, such as water in place of sugar-sweetened beverages."<sup>161</sup> In both these references, there is no mention of unsweetened carbonated and flavored water offering additional appeal or similar hydrating effect as water. In fact, the guidelines identify, "the major source of added sugars in typical U.S. diets is beverages, which include soft drinks, fruit drinks, sweetened coffee and tea, energy drinks, alcoholic beverages, and flavored waters."<sup>162</sup>

Similarly, when discussing 100 percent juice and diluted 100 percent juice, Coca-Cola states that "recent research indicates that 100 percent fruit and vegetable juice is a key source of phytonutrients, which are associated with health benefits."<sup>163</sup> However, the two citations offered to support this claim only focus on

the health effects of Concord and Niagara grape juice, not all 100 percent fruit and vegetable juices as the statement claims.<sup>164</sup> Additionally, the article "Concord and Niagara Grape Juice and Their Phenolics Modify Intestinal Glucose Transport in a Coupled in Vitro Digestion/Caco-2 Human Intestinal Model"<sup>165</sup> was funded by a grant from Welch Foods Inc., a beverage corporation that faced severe backlash for mislabeling and misleading people by claiming that their 100 percent juices had health benefits.<sup>166</sup>

Questionable citations, confounding references, and misleading summaries are common practices used by Coca-Cola to healthwash their brand and products. And the practice is by no means isolated to the U.S. and processes like the development of the DGAs. For but one recent example, you can find much of the same chicanery in Coca-Cola's submission to the South African government's consultation on a proposed sugar-sweetened beverage tax.<sup>167</sup> The considerations and recommendations posed by Coca-Cola can hardly be considered grounded in "existing science," as they claim.

## ILSI NA VIOLATES ITS OWN FIRST PRINCIPLE

Although ILSI's Mandatory Policies mention that each ILSI trustee member "serves in an individual capacity, and not as agents of their employers,"<sup>168</sup> our research debunks this claim. As you'll find is the pattern throughout this report, ILSI has an honesty and transparency problem. It routinely misrepresents or doesn't disclose the extent of its industry ties. It also sets a lot of lofty standards to make government, academia, and the public feel better about listening to and associating with it...that it then doesn't comply with.

Exhibit A: ILSI NA Board of Trustees. In ILSI NA's Policy on Conflict of Interest, Principle 1 on Scientific Integrity states that "The ILSI and ILSI branch Boards of Trustee must be composed of at least 50 percent public sector members (primarily academic) the remaining trustees represent ILSI's member companies."<sup>169</sup> However, according to our analysis 16 out of 28 members have discernible industry ties.

Setting aside the highly-questionable ethics of trustees associated with the United States Department of

Agriculture (USDA), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and academics from universities like Johns Hopkins and Cornell serving on the board of an industry-funded lobby group, let's look at how ILSI NA circumvents its own first principle on scientific integrity. The lobbying group lists four members as "public," despite their longstanding industry ties including Fergus Clydesdale, who you can read more on in the section on U.S. dietary guidelines.

Even though ILSI's Board of Trustees Conflict of Interest Policy and Disclosure Form specifies that members "do not need to disclose [corporate] consultancy unless it relates in some way to your duties as an ILSI trustee,"<sup>170</sup> these individuals oversee ILSI's organization-wide programmatic and fiscal policymaking,<sup>171,172</sup> and many trustees also cross-pollinate to influence nutrition and food safety research in scientific subcommittees, fundamentally advancing the industry's bottom line.<sup>173</sup>

#### **"Public" members of ILSI NA Board of Trustees**

##### **Mario G. Ferruzzi.**

**North Carolina State University.**<sup>174,175</sup> Worked for Nestlé, was a scientific advisor for General Mills, Hershey's, and Welch's,<sup>176</sup> and is currently on the Board of Sensient Technologies.<sup>177</sup>

##### **Simin Nikbin Meydani. Tufts University.**<sup>178,179</sup>

A former advisor to Minute Maid and Bayer.<sup>180</sup> She currently serves on a Coca-Cola and Dannon advisory boards.<sup>181</sup>

**Gary Beauchamp. Director of the Monell Chemical Senses Center.**<sup>182,183</sup> Stated at an ILSI conference that he works with "a lot with companies,"<sup>184</sup> but validates his supposed independence by saying he doesn't "get much money from them."<sup>185</sup>

The common thread? In addition to their capacities consulting for and/or advising corporations, these individuals work for academic institutions. And because these individuals aren't full-time employees of member corporations, ILSI gives them a pass in their designation.

#### **ILSI AND OXFORD'S PEER-REVIEWED JUNK SCIENCE**

Two members of the DGAC are also editors for ILSI's nutrition science publication, *Nutrition Reviews*. The

publication originated in 1942 by the food industry's Nutrition Foundation "to provide an authoritative, unbiased, editorially interpreted review of the world's current research progress in the science of nutrition."<sup>186,187</sup> That was the public-facing rationale, at least, if you care to believe it. With the Nutrition Foundation and ILSI's merger in 1985, the publication has continued to be maintained.<sup>188</sup> And thanks to factors like a lengthy history, the reach and resources its Big Food benefactors are able to lend it, and a recent association with Oxford University Press, *Nutrition Reviews* is among the most highly circulated and impactful nutrition journals globally.<sup>189</sup>

The credibility Oxford University Press (OUP) lent the journal cannot be overstated. It is the largest university press in the world.<sup>190</sup> And the university's name is synonymous with scientific integrity and rigor, regularly ranking as the world's top university.<sup>191</sup> Yet, the partnership agreement between ILSI and OUP is shrouded in secrecy. OUP has thus far failed to comply with a 2018 Freedom of Information request asking it to disclose details about the partnership such as: how it came about, safeguards against conflicts of interest, and whether concerns were raised around associating Oxford with a voice piece for the food industry.<sup>192</sup> In 2019, USRTK filed a lawsuit against the University of Vermont (*USRTK v. University of Vermont and State Agricultural College*) requesting information on Dr. Naomi Fukagawa, former ILSI *Nutrition Reviews* Editor-in-Chief.<sup>193</sup> Their request was officially denied by the institution.

Lacking transparency is not unique to *Nutrition Reviews* partnership with OUP. Corporate Accountability has found that ILSI affiliations and conflicts of interest are not always disclosed in the publication. This is in spite of the fact that the same as other peer reviewed journals, ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews* has a Competing Interests Process and a Declaration of Interest Statement for authors. According to ILSI's process, "all authors are required to disclose relevant competing interests by noting them in the Acknowledgements section of the manuscript."<sup>194</sup> In the *Nutrition Reviews*' Declaration of Interest Statement, authors must also disclose financial relationships that "might be construed as a conflict of interest significant enough to influence the results or interpretation of articles accepted for publication."<sup>195</sup>

## NOTABLE EXAMPLES OF ILSI NUTRITION REVIEWS' DIFFICULTY WITH DISCLOSURE

The Role of Yogurt in Improving the Quality of the American Diet and Meeting Dietary Guidelines (2014)<sup>196</sup>

2020 DGAC member Sharon Donovan failed to disclose financial ties to corporations like Mead Johnson, Abbott Nutrition, and Glycom in this Dannon-sponsored study.<sup>197</sup> And co-author Denise Webb, similarly failed to disclose her ties to ILSI.<sup>198,199</sup>

Health Benefits Of Yogurt Among Infants And Toddlers Aged 4 To 24 Months: A Systematic Review (2019)<sup>200</sup>

2020 DGAC member Sharon Donovan did not disclose her 1) ties to Big Food and Beverage<sup>201</sup>, 2) role as current associate editor of ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews*<sup>202</sup>, or 3) her role as former scientific advisor of ILSI NA.<sup>203</sup>

What is the Appropriate Upper Limit for Added Sugars Consumption? (2016)<sup>204</sup>

Co-author James Rippe failed to disclose his affiliation with ILSI Mexico, for whom he led a forum titled "Current evidence on sweeteners and health," which "received 10 million dollars from the US Corn Refiners Association to establish that the consumption of sugar had no impact on cardiovascular health."<sup>205</sup>

## ILSI'S DIFFICULTY DISCLOSING ITS ROLE IN RESEARCH

ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews* isn't the only place the industry group is challenged with respect to disclosure. In fact, just last year ILSI NA commissioned an assessment of how well it was doing in disclosing when it was connected to research.<sup>206</sup> The assessment found that from 2013 to 2017,<sup>207</sup> at least 37 percent of ILSI's publications did not include any disclosure, while some publications that declared no conflict of interest, enjoyed direct ILSI support or funding.<sup>208</sup> It begs the question: if ILSI is the credible, scientific institution it claims to be, why wouldn't it be more diligent in enforcing its supposedly "mandatory" policies<sup>209</sup> and/or associating itself with the research it funds and informs?

ILSI NA claims to uphold its four core values (scientific integrity, transparency, collaboration, and public benefit) through its Guiding Principles,<sup>210</sup> Conflict of Interest Policy,<sup>211</sup> Articles of Incorporation,<sup>212</sup> Bylaws,<sup>213</sup> and its implementation of the Center for Open Science's Transparency and Openness Promotion (TOP) Guidelines.<sup>214</sup> Given the amount of copious guidance ILSI's NA branch has given itself, you'd think it'd be better about adhering to stronger standards for disclosure.

That is, unless this guidance is really just window-dressing to project the front group as something it is not and assuage the concerns of publishers,

policymakers, and the public alike. And raising further doubt about the sincerity of guidance ILSI NA gives itself, is the make-up of who developed it. In 2009, ILSI NA published Guiding Principles “on proposed COI guidelines regarding industry funding, integrity and credibility of the scientific record, particularly with respect to health, nutrition, and food-safety science.”<sup>215</sup> Several drafters of these principles were affiliated with industry leaders, including Dr. Rhonda Applebaum, then-Vice President and Chief Regulatory Officer at Coca-Cola, and Dr. Richard Black, then-Vice President of Nutrition at Kraft Foods Global, Inc.<sup>216</sup> The ILSI Working Group on Guiding Principles also received “educational grants” from Cadbury, Coca-Cola, ConAgra, General Mills, Kraft, Mars, PepsiCo, Procter & Gamble, and Sara Lee.<sup>217</sup>

Needless to say, the type of research you see here wouldn't have a fraction of the effect on policy, public opinion, and nutrition science if readers were aware of its ties to an industry trade group.

### The Scientific Basis of Guideline Recommendations on Sugar Intake (2017)<sup>218,219</sup>

This ILSI-funded paper disparages global recommendations on limiting sugar. Its findings were so self-serving, it prompted criticism from candy-maker Mars (then an ILSI member),<sup>220</sup> Co-author, and 2010 DGAC member, Joanne Slavin did not disclose her financial ties with Big Food and Beverage, including Coca-Cola,<sup>221</sup> PepsiCo, and Nestlé.<sup>222</sup>

### The Confusing World of Dietary Sugars: Definitions, Intakes, Food Sources and International Dietary Recommendations (2012)<sup>223,224</sup>

This article was supported by the ILSI NA Committee on Carbohydrates, but no financial disclosure was provided.<sup>225</sup> Needless to say, co-author Joanne Slavin did not disclose her industry or ILSI ties.<sup>226</sup> According to emails obtained by Associated Press, she even received feedback from a Coca-Cola executive and others on her publication.<sup>227</sup>

### Consumption of Low-Calorie Sweeteners among U.S. Adults is Associated with Higher Healthy Index (HEI 2005) Scores and More Physical Activity (2014)<sup>228</sup>

This article aimed at associating low-calorie sweeteners with a healthy lifestyle, received funding from none other than ILSI NA Committee on Low-Calorie Sweeteners.<sup>229</sup> But you wouldn't know it from the acknowledgements.

### Physical Activity and Eating Habits in Public High Schools from Different Regions in Brazil: The Saude na Boa Project (2009)<sup>230</sup>

Following a pattern of backing research that can help shift blame from diet to physical activity for diet-related disease, ILSI supported this study<sup>231</sup> ...but is nowhere to be found in the disclosure.

# Upending health across the globe

The extent of ILSI's political interference and junk science promotion is becoming better understood by the day thanks to investigative reporters and civil society organizations such as El Poder Del Consumidor,<sup>232</sup> Alliance Against Conflict of Interest<sup>233</sup> and U.S. Right to Know.<sup>234</sup> Our analysis takes this understanding deeper to discern just how this "shadowy industry group"—as anointed by the New York Times—continues to undermine public health in the wake of damning exposés and a break with one of its most prominent members.<sup>235</sup>

## IN MEXICO, ILSI COMES, GOES, RETURNS, REBRANDS...BUT COCA-COLA STAYS AT THE HELM

Those following Big Soda's chicanery will recall in 2015 when ILSI Mexico, under the leadership of Coca-Cola executive Raúl Portillo Aldrett, brought experts paid by the soda industry to present a series of studies at the Spanish Hospital Convention Center indicating no causal relationship between sugar-sweetened beverages and diet-related disease.<sup>236,237,238</sup> The event, according to leading Mexican public interest organization El Poder Del Consumidor, appeared to be aimed at repealing Mexico's sugar-sweetened beverage tax.<sup>239,240</sup>

This was too much...even for an industry group that has difficulty adhering to its own ethics standards, is deeply embedded in policymaking processes, and regularly traffics in misinformation. Shortly after the event the ILSI Board of Trustees Executive Committee suspended its affiliation with ILSI Mexico for "violating ILSI's Code of Ethics and Standards of Organizational Conduct"<sup>241,242</sup> and "engaging in activities that can be construed to be policy advocacy and/or public relations efforts to influence policy."<sup>243</sup>

The suspension proved a useful public relations stunt. In response to bad media, the global surrogate for Big Food policymaking feigned outrage. Then, not 10 months later, ILSI Mexico was back online<sup>244</sup> under the leadership of another Coca-Cola executive, J. Eduardo Cervantes.<sup>245</sup> For optics' sake, they could have at least picked someone who wasn't an executive with the

world's largest sugar water manufacturer!

Ultimately, ILSI's Board did come around, announcing three years later that "ILSI Mexico was never able to recover from the suspension."<sup>246</sup> But in a predictable but similarly illogical twist, it addressed the challenges related to ILSI's close and public ties with Big Soda by merging the branch with ILSI Mesoamerica led by...wait for it...a 38-year Coca-Cola executive named Jorge Arturo Jara.<sup>247</sup>

As with the earlier suspension, the move reeks of insincerity. If ILSI were truly concerned about the antics of its affiliates in promoting junk science and opposing nutrition policy that, in Mexico's case promises to save thousands of lives and nearly a billion in healthcare costs,<sup>248</sup> it wouldn't just be shuffling leadership from one Coca-Cola executive to the next.

Indeed, surrounding the initial fallout around ILSI Mexico's sugar-sweetened-beverages-aren't-that-bad-for-you expo, ILSI founder and former Coca-Cola executive Dr. Alex Malaspina suggested the industry front group "save face" by pursuing an affiliate merger.<sup>249</sup> Of course, in keeping with ILSI's calculated difficulties with transparency and, well, honesty, it claimed "Malaspina... has no position with ILSI and any comments he has made subsequently are as a long-retired private citizen with no authority to direct or influence ILSI's actions."<sup>250</sup> And then they did as he suggested.



ILSI Mesoamerica President Jorge Arturo Jara champagne toasting Victoria Hernández Mora (Minister of Economy, Industry and Commerce of Costa Rica) and Carmela Velázquez (Vice President of ILSI Mesoamerica) in celebration of the entity's anniversary. Photo credit: ILSI

## **ILSI INDIA: PARTNERING WITH SCIENTISTS TO PAVE THE WAY FOR BIG SODA**

With a population of more than 1.3 billion people, India has long been in the cross-hairs of Big Soda's expansion plans.<sup>251</sup> Recently, Coca-Cola CEO James Quincy announced that India is quickly on its way to becoming the third-largest market for the corporation.<sup>252</sup> And it will come as no surprise that ILSI has been busy laying the groundwork for said expansion. Whether it's spinning a complex web of revolving doors or partnering with leading research institutions to denigrate traditional diets, the trade group's presence is proving toxic for public health. The Great Game India found that ILSI's expanding influence in India (alongside Coca-Cola's expanding market) has "coincided with mounting rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, especially diabetes, which affects more than 70 million Indians."<sup>253</sup> Here are some of the key players:

### **Alok Dhawan**

Runs the country's largest research and development organization (the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research), which was established by the Indian government.<sup>254</sup> Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>255</sup>

### **Kamala Krishnaswamy**

Former Director of the National Institute of Nutrition, which provides guidance on nutrition policy to the country.<sup>256</sup> Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>257</sup>

### **S. K. Saxena**

Director of the official export-certification body of India, which ensures quality and safety of export products. Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>258</sup>

### **B. Sesikeran**

Past Director of National Institute of Nutrition and current President of the Nutrition Society of India.<sup>259</sup> Gained notoriety in a 2019 New York Times exposé for his leadership of a government panel that postponed new labels for unhealthy packaged foods. Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>260</sup>

### **B.K. Nandia**

Former Senior Food and Nutrition Officer at United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.<sup>261</sup> Current ILSI India trustee.

### **Rajendra Dobriyal**

Director of Scientific & Regulatory Affairs at Coca-Cola India Pvt. Ltd. Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>262</sup>

### **Sanjay Khajuria**

Vice President of Corporate Affairs and Strategic Planning Department at Nestlé India Ltd.<sup>263</sup> Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>264</sup>

### **Akira Otabe**

D.V.M., General Manager, Scientific & Regulatory Affairs / Quality Assurance at Ajinomoto SEA Regional Headquarters Co. Ltd.<sup>265</sup> Current ILSI India trustee.<sup>266</sup>

### **Jasvir Singh**

Regulatory, Scientific & Government Affairs Leader of South Asia, DuPont Nutrition & Health, Danisco (India) Pvt. Ltd, Gurugram.<sup>267</sup> Current ILSI India board president.<sup>268</sup>

These individuals comprise the overwhelming majority of ILSI India's board. With the panoply of government affiliations and access, alongside the direct ties to industry, you have to wonder: how could ILSI be construed as anything but a lobbying organization (which its code of ethics forbids)?

That's a rhetorical question.

B. Sesikeran, for one, plays a large role in controlling the Niti Aayog, the Government of India's policy think tank.<sup>269</sup> The Times of India uncovered that many members of the Niti Aayog's 2017 Working Group on Nutrition, not unlike the DGACs, have underlying ties to ILSI and the food and beverage industry.<sup>270</sup> And at the beginning of 2020, Sesikeran spearheaded an expert review panel that reviewed India's newly-proposed packaged foods labelling rules and mandatory genetically-modified food labelling, raising questions about severe conflict of interests and his neglect for public health.<sup>271</sup>

ILSI India is emblematic of how ILSI at large ensures that the food and beverage industry are able to deepen their capture of public policy and discourse thereabouts across the globe. One such example of this is an ILSI-sponsored study on sugar consumption by two of India's most respected research entities, the Indian Council of Medical Research, and the National Institute of Nutrition. An alliance of public interest

organizations and health professionals, the Alliance Against Conflict of Interest, was quick to call out the study as an “incompatible partnership.”<sup>272</sup> The Alliance further noted “ILSI has been pursuing policy influence in India and elsewhere, in particular, with respect to sugary foods and beverages.”<sup>273</sup> But when two former leaders of the National Institute of Nutrition sit on ILSI India’s Board, such partnerships are an inevitability.

What’s more, Corporate Accountability’s examination of the study found a dangerous pattern of skewed findings and deliberate omission to the benefit of ILSI’s corporate benefactors. This may explain why neither the National Institute of Nutrition nor ILSI has made the study publicly available. But in a December 2019 ILSI seminar in New Delhi Avula Laxmaiah of the National Institute did offer a presentation on the subject.<sup>274</sup> From this we can gather that the study looked at consumption of fat, sugar, and salt across rural, tribal, and urban Indian populations.<sup>275</sup>

5 In keeping with Coca-Cola, ILSI, and a broader industry strategy to shift blame for diet-related disease, one of the primary take home messages is for people to increase physical activity.

\* It appears that ILSI India has not made the final report of the study publicly available. Therefore, the analysis provided here is based on the presentation of this study given by Dr. Avula Laxmaiah, Scientist and Head of Public Health at India’s National Institute of Nutrition, at an ILSI India seminar in December 2019.

In other words, the study’s intent seems to be to the absolution of food products marketed by ILSI’s corporate backers and/or redirection of public dietary concerns toward the traditional foods ILSI’s funders would hope to supplant.

## Notes on ILSI India’s nutrition study.

- 1 There’s a complete and glaring absence in the conclusion of any reference to ultra-processed foods, junk food, fast food, soda, sugary beverages, sugar-sweetened beverages, etc. Strange, to say the least, for a study that surveyed the public’s consumption of specific types of food products.
- 2 Study goes to lengths to describe how the public’s “intake of sugar was high” through traditional foods such as wheat gruel, rice/corn flakes with milk, and oats with milk, but makes no mention of sugary drinks or any other junk food in this regard.
- 3 Conclusion places blame for heightened sugar consumption on drinks enjoyed by Indians for centuries such as masala tea, coffee, milk shakes, and lassis,<sup>276</sup> notably excluding the more recently introduced sugar-sweetened beverages upon which Coca-Cola’s market growth is premised on.
- 4 Study makes no recommendations around reducing consumption of fast food or ultra-processed foods.

## ILSI TAIWAN BOARD CHAIR IS A MCDONALD’S EXECUTIVE

While ILSI owes its origin to Coca-Cola and its ties with the soda giant continue to be among its most prominent, another one of its closest and longest-standing business partners is at the helm in Taiwan.<sup>277</sup> Currently, Coyea Lin, the Vice President of Supply Chain Management at McDonald’s Taiwan,<sup>278</sup> is the Chairperson of ILSI Taiwan’s Board of Directors, where she oversees, reviews, and develops ILSI Taiwan’s agenda.<sup>279</sup> This is but one illustration of how, as one former McDonald’s executive put it, “those two companies helped each other grow and expand around the globe, neither one would be what they are today without the other.”<sup>280</sup> One way Coca-Cola and McDonald’s have helped each other is through their mutual support of ILSI and its efforts to condition regulatory frameworks that are favorable to the junk food industry. And to be certain, ILSI is going gangbusters under a McDonald’s executive’s leadership in Taiwan.<sup>281</sup> With a total of 48 member companies, and a 23-member Board of Directors,<sup>282</sup> it exerts significant influence on nutrition and science in Taiwan.<sup>283</sup> As a side bar, though ILSI claims to operate in an open and transparent manner, you’d be hard-pressed to find the membership lists of many of its affiliates that are more

recent than 2015. So the involvement of McDonald's and other transnational food corporations may, in fact, be deeper than is publicly available.

### **ILSI ARGENTINA'S POLICY INFLUENCE, REVOLVING DOORS, LACK OF DISCLOSURE**

Alongside tools like the DGAs, countries develop something called National Food Composition Databases, which provide a picture of the country's available food and nutrients, as well as public consumption of healthy and unhealthy food.<sup>284</sup> This information is intended to inform sound, unbiased nutrition and agricultural policy. So who better to recommend how the database should inform national policy than an industry-funded lobbying group headed by a former Monsanto executive?

In Argentina, Dr. Clara Rubinstein, a current Scientific Affairs Lead at Bayer Crop Science, heads ILSI's affiliate.<sup>285</sup> And though ILSI supposedly "doesn't lobby," her tenure with the Argentine government's National Research Council (CONICET)<sup>286</sup> surely continues to prove useful...as revolving doors tend to. The affiliate's Scientific Advisory Council is less transparent about its conflicts, failing to disclose *any* corporate affiliations. But they do exist...likely in spades. One Council member, Carla Cecchin, for example, has represented both ILSI Argentina and Coca-Cola at joint Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) sessions.<sup>287,288</sup>

So it understandably raises eyebrows when ILSI Argentina is holding a workshop on "energy balance": the industry's attempt to recast health as a simple matter of balancing calories consumed with calories burned, and calls on "experts from the public and private sector to assess the current status of the National Food Composition Database."<sup>289</sup> What's more, the principal aim of the event was—though ILSI doesn't "make policy recommendations" or "conduct lobbying"—to present a policy brief (since taken down from its site) to "the government and media to contribute to move forward with this Public Health Priority for Argentina."<sup>290</sup>

ILSI Argentina is but a further example of how ILSI and industry are inextricably linked, fraught with conflicts of interest, unable to adhere to their own window-dressing policies on scientific integrity and conflicts of interest, and informing a public health agenda of, for, and by Big Food.

## Conclusion: It's time to put ILSI and its partnerships on ice

For more than 40 years, one industry front group founded by a former Coca-Cola executive, sponsored by the world's largest and unhealthiest brands, and governed by a web of industry-connected researchers has insinuated itself into the health sciences and policymaking at every level of government. The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) is the embodiment of "the swamp" the world's public and public health professionals are clamoring "to drain" from our politics.

The implications for public health of ILSI's political interference and junk science—on behalf of Coca-Cola, Bayer, Dannon, Dow, Dupont, General Mills, Kellogg's, PepsiCo, McDonald's, and a host of other corporate backers—cannot be understated. Since its founding, ILSI has proven critical to the junk food industry's growth and global expansion, with the findings of this report being but one illustration of as much. In this time, the fortunes of these corporations have grown in leaps and bounds....on a similar trajectory to global rates of diet-related disease. The correlation is no coincidence.

Until recently, Big Food has been able to influence public health science and policy vis à vis ILSI with relative impunity. This owes to a number of factors. First, ILSI is able to present the prerogatives of industry under the guise of sound science. It funds researchers connected to prestigious universities and government institutions to produce favorable research. It claims such funding doesn't undermine the objectivity of the results. It boasts about its high standards for balance and scientific integrity.<sup>291</sup> But then, as our report finds, it routinely fails to adhere to its own standards. Its studies regularly fail to disclose conflicts of interest.<sup>292</sup> Its global industry funding is not available to the public. It's also difficult to discern just how individuals associated with ILSI affiliates are compensated. This lack of transparency has allowed industry's ILSI a social license to produce and promote junk science the world over.

What's more, this supposedly "non-lobbying"

organization has then inserted itself into the most critical policymaking processes on food and nutrition across the globe. As we found, the committee that informs the dietary guidelines for the U.S. public is dominated by those with ILSI ties. And these guidelines are the blueprint for food and nutrition policies at every level of government. But the U.S. experience is not an anomaly. In India or Argentina, Mexico or Taiwan, ILSI can be found agitating for changes to similar, official processes and policies so as to benefit industry over public health.<sup>293</sup>

This said, Big Food's bankrolling of ILSI and its 16 affiliates globally should not just be a concern for the public health community, but investors. Shareholders are becoming increasingly aware and concerned about how the corporations they are invested in are connected to this. As research from the global public relations firm Edelman makes clear, people want to do business with corporations that share their beliefs.<sup>294</sup> That's why corporations like Coca-Cola go to great lengths to position themselves as an environmental leader (when, in fact, it's the world's biggest plastic polluter).<sup>295</sup> McDonald's goes to great lengths to appear family friendly (while historically lobbying against paid sick leave,<sup>296</sup> minimum wage increases,<sup>297</sup> and other policies to give working families a leg-up).<sup>298</sup> ILSI's backers want to communicate that they care about public health and are part of the solution to the problem they have created in marketing a high-volume of junk food and beverage to the public. ILSI's very existence and actions don't sync very well with that aspiration. And if ILSI, its junk science, and political manipulation are what's required for Coca-Cola and others to provide returns...there's a reckoning coming.

As witnessed in North America and Europe, growing public health consciousness has made it more and more difficult for ILSI's backers to expand market share. Coca-Cola and others are racing to capitalize on Markets in the Global South before they also sour on the industry's junk food and science. But, in this internet age, that time horizon may not be as long as Big Food would hope.

But food and beverage transnationals needn't wait for public ire and shareholder concern over the sanctity of their stock's value proposition. They can address the

misalignment of their stated brand values with their funding of front groups like ILSI immediately. Mars already took this judicious step in 2018,<sup>299</sup> recognizing the liability that exists in being affiliated with a group that has become synonymous with corporate capture of health science and policy.<sup>300</sup> On January 1, 2020, Nestlé followed suit and officially ended its ILSI membership, at a regional and country level.<sup>301</sup>

To this end, this report demands corporations cease political and charitable giving and all other forms of political interference (e.g. lobbying, contributions, funding research, creating revolving doors with policymakers, influencing public policy) by:

### TAKING THE FOLLOWING PRELIMINARY STEPS

- **Sever all ties with ILSI**, including ILSI Research Foundation and ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews*.
- **Issue a public statement condemning ILSI's interference** in public health policy and promotion of junk science.
- **Provide full global disclosure of their political and charitable giving** to enhance transparency and public disclosure within the corporation and illustrate the amount of funding provided to ILSI and other industry-backed groups.
- **Establish a Committee of the Board** to publicly and independently assess the corporations' public health liabilities, including the funding of front groups like ILSI.

### RECOMMENDING GOVERNMENTS

- **Publicly disclose direct government interactions with ILSI**, including the interactions of public officials at agencies such as USDA, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Center for Disease Control, and U.S. Food and Drug Administration that work with ILSI.<sup>302</sup>
- **Prohibit ILSI and other industry groups to nominate** participants in official food and nutrition policy processes such as the development of the DGAs.
- **Prohibit those with ties to ILSI and other industry groups** from participating on the DGAs and other

similar processes.

- **Discontinue all partnerships and "involvement" with ILSI**, including allowing current government employees to in any way affiliate with the group.
- **Uphold prohibitions on "revolving doors,"** including mandatory "cooling-off" or "waiting" periods for former civil servants or public officials to engage in lobbying activities.
- **Implement appropriate mandatory "revolving door" prohibitions to reduce industry influence on public policies**, if there are no existing revolving door prohibitions in place.
- **Improve formal electoral or regulatory disclosure requirements for corporate charitable giving** to increase transparency and accountability towards corporate philanthropy, a strategy that is often used for political influence.<sup>303</sup>
- **Improve public disclosure requirements for tax-exempt nonprofit organizations** and hold nonprofits accountable if the three most recent financial statements are not available for public viewing.

### RECOMMENDING ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

- **Sever all ties with ILSI**, including ILSI Research Foundation and ILSI's *Nutrition Reviews*.
- **Issue a public statement condemning ILSI's interference** in public health policy and promotion of junk science.
- **Prohibit its employees from taking ILSI financial support** or otherwise affiliating with the group.
- **Stop taking research funding from food and beverage industry funded groups such as ILSI and ABA, or the industry itself.**

The magnitude of the public health challenges we face today, whether in the form of a pandemic or the crippling rates of diet-related disease, cannot suffer another four decades of deceit and manipulation from ILSI and similar, but less influential industry front groups. It is time that industry, governments, and academia put ILSI on ice before another nation's, community's, or individual's health is compromised.

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Corporate Accountability stops transnational corporations from devastating democracy, trampling human rights, and destroying our planet. We are building a world rooted in justice where corporations answer to people, not the other

way around—a world where every person has access to clean water, healthy food, a safe place to live, and the opportunity to reach their full human potential.

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