



# International Life Sciences Institute is advocate for food and drink industry, say researchers

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Researchers have labelled the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) an industry front group, after studying thousands of documents from the influential sponsor of published research on nutrition and health.

Writing in the journal *Globalization and Health*,<sup>1</sup> researchers from the University of Cambridge in England, Bocconi University in Italy, and the US Right to Know campaign called ILSI a “case study” that “serves as a caution to those involved in global health governance to be wary of putatively independent research groups.”

Sarah Steele, lead author from the University of Cambridge, said, “Our findings only continue to add to the evidence that this non-profit organisation has been used by its corporate backers for years to counter public health policies.

“We contend that the International Life Sciences Institute should be regarded as an industry group—a private body—and regulated as such, not as a body acting for the greater good.”

## Freedom of information request

ILSI describes its mission as promoting “global partnerships for a healthier world” and providing “science that improves human health and wellbeing and safeguards the environment.” Its mission statement declares, “ILSI does not lobby, conduct lobbying activities, or make policy recommendations.”

But this claim, said the researchers, is undermined by over 17 000 pages of emails and other documents that US Right to Know obtained from ILSI, a non-profit organisation based in Washington, DC, through a freedom of information request. Prominent among these are the emails of Alex Malaspina, ILSI’s founder and former vice president of Coca-Cola.

Malaspina, a long time president of ILSI, corresponded with a network of academics, doctors, industry executives, and eventually his successors in the charity’s leadership. The group commented on regulatory policy and how to influence it, often appearing to use the terms “we” or “us” as a synonym for industry.

In one email sent after new US dietary guidelines took a stronger line on sugar, Malaspina wrote, “Dear friends, these guidelines are a real disaster! They could eventually affect us significantly in many ways: soft drink taxations, modified school luncheon programs, a strong educational effort to educate children and adults to significantly limit their sugar intake, curtail advertising of sugary foods and beverages and eventually a great pressure from CDC [the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]

and other agencies to force industry to start reducing drastically the sugar we add to processed foods and beverages.

“Also we have to expect that many nations will follow the US guidelines. We have to consider how to become ready to mount a strong defence.”

In another email he described “the mess ILSI Mexico is in because they sponsored in September a sweeteners conference when the subject of soft drinks taxation was discussed. ILSI is now suspending ILSI Mexico, until they correct their ways.”

In other emails from 2015 Malaspina complained to Barbara Bowman, director of the CDC’s division for heart disease and stroke prevention, about the increasing coldness towards ILSI from the World Health Organization—whose director general, Margaret Chan, was then fashioning a harder line against sugary drinks. He noted that he had managed to smooth relations under a previous WHO leader through direct contact but found Chan inaccessible.

Current WHO leaders “do not want to work with industry,” he complained, adding, “Something must be done.”

He suggested recruiting a top scientist or a “US government scientist” to approach Chan; Bowman suggested several alternative avenues. That email exchange was published in the media in 2016. The CDC’s Bowman, herself a former Coca-Cola scientist, announced her retirement days later.<sup>2</sup>

## Donations

Brenda Fitzgerald, who was appointed by President Trump in 2017 to run the CDC, also corresponded frequently with ILSI’s leadership. She resigned from her CDC post after news of her tobacco investments surfaced.<sup>3</sup>

WHO was criticised in 2016 after Alan Boobis, ILSI vice president, chaired a meeting to establish policy on the weedkiller glyphosate. ILSI had previously taken more than \$1m (£788 000; €888 000) in donations from a leading glyphosate manufacturer, Monsanto, and an affiliated lobbying group.<sup>4</sup> WHO finally cut its formal ties with ILSI in 2017.

The European Parliament temporarily suspended funding of the European Food Safety Authority in 2012, after conflict of interest allegations surfaced involving ILSI members on its board.

One industry leader, Mars Co, quit ILSI last year, explaining in a statement, “We do not want to be involved in advocacy-led

studies that so often, and mostly for the right reasons, have been criticised.”

A *BMJ* investigation in January found that staff at ILSI China had “unparalleled access to government officials”—their offices are located inside the headquarters of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention—and had successfully steered China’s thinking on obesity prevention towards a focus on exercise and away from sugar reduction, in line with industry’s goals.<sup>5</sup>

ILSI was approached for comment but had not responded by the time of publication.

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- 4 Nesten A. UN/WHO panel in conflict of interest row over glyphosate cancer risk. *Guardian* 2016 May 17. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/may/17/unwho-panel-in-conflict-of-interest-row-over-glyphosates-cancer-risk>.
- 5 Greenhalgh S. Making China safe for Coke: how Coca-Cola shaped obesity science and policy in China. *BMJ* 2019;364:k505010.1136/bmj.k5050.

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