

Conflict of interest in nutrition conference financing: Moving towards solutions after IUNS 2022

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Abstract

Making contributions to reducing malnutrition entails sharing evidence and approaches among the research and practice communities, including through conferences. But who is involved in these processes, including who pays, matters both in terms of actions and optics. This paper was motivated by observations – in 2022 and historically – that the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS), in putting on its flagship International Congress of Nutrition (ICN), was leaving itself – and, by extension, participating scientists – open to conflicts of interest (COI). With contemporary scholarship on the commercial determinants of health making clear the ways in which this kind of sponsorship represents both a conflict of interest for nutrition events and a negative force in broader food system drivers of nutrition, this paper aims to document the issues surrounding the 2022 IUNS-ICN conference as historical record; draw on academic literature on conflict of interest to better understand the issue; and suggest some practical options moving towards COI-free nutrition events in the future.

Introduction

Many applied researchers and academics want to contribute to addressing practical and political challenges in nutrition. Making research contributions entails sharing evidence and approaches among the research and practice communities, including through conferences. But who is involved in these processes, including who pays, matters both in terms of actions and optics. This paper was motivated by observations – in 2022 and historically – that the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS), in putting on its flagship International Congress of Nutrition (ICN), was leaving itself – and, by extension, participating scientists – open to conflicts of interest (COI). IUNS is not the only nutrition body with these issues, but it is an emblematic one, and one that can set the tone of the field. This paper therefore aims to document the issues surrounding the 2022 IUNS-ICN conference as historical record; draw on academic literature on conflict of interest to better understand the issue; and suggest some practical options moving towards COI-free nutrition events in the future.

Conflict of interest and nutrition

Almost twenty years ago, Marion Nestle wrote “Sponsorship is so prevalent and so financially beneficial that hardly anyone can imagine that it might compromise research or opinion” (Nestle, 2001). This issue is now better documented and understood, and in the past ten years scholars from different disciplines related to public health and nutrition have urged institutions, governments, academic and intergovernmental organizations to avoid sponsorship or any

financial relationship with health-harming industries such as tobacco, alcohol, agribusiness, arms, and ultra-processed foods (Stuckler and Nestle 2012; Hennessy et al. 2019). Research has shown that sponsorship of academic conferences has long been a key strategy used by corporate actors with a vested interest in shaping a field of research and public discourse to their own advantage (i.e., away from the harms of particular products or to undermine public health responses) (Mailon et al. 2021). Research and policy-advocacy with a direct link to these vested interests has also been shown to have a significant risk of bias harmful to public health (Kearns 2016; Greenhalgh 2019) and industry groups themselves have sought to re-take this narrative through approaches such as voluntary guidelines (Rowe 2009), though this latter issue is not the core topic of this paper.

At issue is the topic of COI. As adopted by the World Health Organisation (WHO 2017) and broader public health bodies, we define COI as a situation in which “a set of conditions in which professional judgement concerning a primary interest (such as a patient’s welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest (such as financial gain)” (Thompson 1993, p573). Conflicts can play out when corporate funds are used to fund nutrition conferences. Sponsorship sets up a reciprocity between the sponsor and the host organization, and has the potential to bias the nutrition field in two major ways: 1) closed-door mechanisms might bias what gets funded, reported or prioritised, or even exclude actors from decisions or venues in ways that might compromise the core public health-related mission (Mialon et al. 2020); and 2) public sponsorship buys some of the reputational trust held by the host organization, and confers acceptability on the sponsor via a ‘halo effect’.

This issue has been less studied in nutrition, but studies of related pharmaceutical industry practices show that physicians who attend sponsored conferences (or benefit from other forms of sponsorship) are more likely to write prescriptions for the sponsor's medications, for instance (Wazana 2000). Recent research has found that the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Committee members’ COIs have not been assessed for more than one year before engaging in the work, and most members had COI (Mialon et al. 2022). Links between the industry lobby-group International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) and research sponsorships, Coca-Cola’s financing several conferences including COP27 (Guinto 2022), and the participation of corporations in the UN Food Systems Summit have all been criticized on the basis of COI (Canfield et al. 2021; Gunnarsson et al. 2022).

While host organizations (e.g., conference committees) may seek to justify sponsorship by distancing themselves from the sponsor’s products or clarifying guidelines to address the first issue of outright bias, the second issue of the halo effect is harder to brush aside -- the association remains; trust has been purchased.

The case of IUNS

COI in IUNS event sponsorship

With contemporary scholarship on the commercial determinants of health making clear the ways in which this kind of sponsorship represents both a COI for nutrition events and a negative force in broader food system drivers of nutrition, multiple academics noticed that the IUNS-ICN event in Tokyo was sponsored by several food industry companies that do not seem to have healthy nutrition at the core of their business, including a sugar company and companies producing breast-milk substitutes (see Box 1). An [open letter](#) outlining concerns including potential COI

was signed by many academics and sent to the IUNS secretariat and the Tokyo organizing committee. In response, the IUNS published [two sponsorship policy updates](#), and removed several sponsors of the Tokyo conference as these were found to violate their own [private sector engagement policy](#).

Box 1: Examples of issues identified in IUNS-ICN 2022 sponsorship

We are aware of the line of thought that suggests that we won't end global malnutrition without collaboration with corporates, and that they can be part of the solution. We believe that more nuance is needed in terms of who to engage with and how, and that those who peddle sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) and ultra-processed foods (UPFs) (and have huge power already to shape the discourse and the system) should not be given additional seats at the table. As a single example, we would question on this basis the IUNS-ICN 2022 sponsorship by Quaker Oats, a company wholly owned by PepsiCo.

IUNS will be similarly aware of the highly controversial role of the producers of breast-milk substitutes (BMS), and in particular those who violate the [International Code of Marketing on Breast Milk Substitutes](#) (the Code). We do not believe that any manufacturers of BMS have a place in sponsoring a nutrition conference, and suggest that this violates the Code. As a single example, we would question on this basis the IUNS-ICN 2022 sponsorship by MegMilk Snow Brand Company and the Meiji Group which manufacture and market BMS.

We note that the IUNS developed [Conflict of Interest, Funding and Private Sector Engagement Guidelines](#) in 2021 (building on efforts by WHO in creating a Conflict of Interest Screening Tool), which state in relation to private sector participation in IUNS-organized scientific meetings that: "Industry seeks to highlight relevant findings from its in-house research programs, as well as to explain the scientific basis of their products". This is different to financial sponsorship, which does not suggest scientific merit and carries the risk of preventing serious dialogue on the scientific merits of action and regulation to prevent obesity and other risks to nutrition such as Code violations. As a single example, we would question on this basis the IUNS-ICN 2022 sponsorship by Tate and Lyle sugar company, which surely has no place explaining the scientific basis for sugar consumption?

Many academics involved in this action have noted that this is not an isolated incident but is embedded in IUNS history, and that there is a long history of problematic food company sponsorship of IUNS events, going back to the 1970s.

- At the 1978 ICN in Rio de Janeiro, an activist from IBFAN protesting against Nestlé sponsorship of the event was arrested. Brazil was ruled by a military dictatorship at that time and the president of the Brazilian arm of IUNS was a retired army colonel. There was a document protesting against the arrest, but few Brazilian participants signed, some fearing retaliation from the dictatorship, and some fearing loss of financial support from Nestlé support.
- There was a protest with placards during the ICN in Adelaide in 1992. In front of the conference hall, a representative of one of the American infant formula companies confronted the demonstrators and even threw pellets at Patrice Jelliffe

- (Derrick Jelliffe's spouse – both of whom were outstanding pioneers in child health and infant feeding).
- Nevertheless, Patrice was at the centre of protests at the ICN in Montreal five years later, emotionally excoriating the conference organizers for accepting "tainted money" from breast-milk substitute companies.

Protest and activism against COI at IUNS-ICN 2022

With contemporary scholarship on the commercial determinants of health making clear the ways in which this kind of sponsorship represents both a COI for nutrition events and a negative force in broader food system drivers of nutrition, a group of over 50 concerned academics and nutritionists over the course of 2022 worked to engage with IUNS and (in some cases) disengage with the Tokyo conference in a coordinated attempt to address this issue.

A letter was sent to both the ICN local Organising Committee as well as the IUNS Council highlighting their concern related to the appropriateness of the private sector sponsors and exhibitors displayed on the congress website and how this placed many possible speakers in a difficult ethical position. UNICEF and WHO also wrote expressing dismay at their accepting funding from breast-milk substitute manufacturers. A response was received by the ICN Organising Committee and IUNS President in which they recognised that they had incorrectly taken sponsorship from Code violating breast-milk substitute companies and that the funding had been returned and all reference to them removed from ICN materials and electronic media. Despite this violation of their own IUNS policy, they stated that the policy was “being followed explicitly” and would “be monitored and enforced throughout the 22nd ICN”. They refrained from addressing the concern related to the appropriateness of their current policy, given the changing landscape, or the inclusion of funding from companies that do not embody strong ethics around food, nutrition, and health.

UNICEF, Innovative Methods and Metrics for Agriculture and Nutrition Actions (IMMANA), together with a number of other potential delegates decided to withdraw from participating in the 22nd ICN. Others decided to attend and be part of a visible campaign not only to continue to draw the Organising Committee and IUNS Council’s attention to the sponsorship dissatisfaction, but also to communicate the issue of COI to other delegates, and to dialog with the IUNS Council on COI issues. Buttons with #EndCOIatIUNS were worn and handed out to interested individuals at the congress. The hashtag appeared on many slides and was used on social media.

A meeting was arranged with the outgoing and incoming IUNS Presidents and the Chair of the next ICN Organising Committee to voice the concerns in person. A commitment was made by the incoming President to form a task force to consider the IUNS Private Sector Engagement Policy, recognising that the IUNS is a membership association of over 80 national nutrition societies and it is this body that will take any decisions on the COI policy going forward. It will be critical to keep engaging with scientists from around the world in discussions at both their national level and to influence decisions made at the global level. The wider community needs to join in the effort to put an end to both overt and covert COI that hampers progress towards addressing malnutrition in all its forms, but particularly overweight and obesity.

Practical options going forward

Strengthening COI policy

Good practice in research and its publication includes prominent disclosure of funding sources and COI to allow an assessment of commercial biases (Fabbri et al. 2018). Certainly, disclosure of funding links is an important first step, but acknowledging these is not enough; nor does a declaration of a COI suffice, as the conflict still exists. Large companies have corporate social responsibility (CSR) units and linked foundations which are looking for opportunities to support pro-nutrition activities and projects. These projects (including research and research conferences) may, in and of themselves, be positive for nutrition—but if the core business of the company continues to generate a net harm to nutrition, these CSR activities are mere distractions at best. Host organisations should not accept sponsorship on the basis of small-scale CSR projects – the focus has to be on the net (large-scale) benefit or harm on nutrition of the core business. We need to go beyond judging the merits of any single project or type of engagement, to look at the bigger picture of what the company is doing as part of its core business. In the long run, the only way effectively to address or ‘manage’ conflicts of interest is to avoid them. And to do this, we argue that companies (sponsors) need to demonstrate independently-verified evidence of sustained, large-scale, pro-nutrition practices (not just pledges, commitments) before discussions on engagement, sponsorship or partnerships start. Other fields have decided the same: major medical journals such as the British Medical Journal Group recently dropped infant formula advertising, for instance (Hickman et al. 2021).

Actions such as these require strongly and clearly worded – and properly implemented and monitored – COI policies which lay out these red lines (Gillespie and Nisbett 2019). The IUNS does have a private sector engagement policy, but the wording is ambiguous, and in the case of the Tokyo ICN, the policy as worded was not fully implemented or monitored. Perhaps a stronger policy would align more clearly with global health governing bodies on professional associations and COI. For example, WHO and UNICEF have developed a [statement](#) on Sponsorship of Health Professional and Scientific Meetings by Companies that Market Foods for Infants and Young Children. This provides a strong position from these normative bodies, as well as clear definitions of COI and is highly relevant for IUNS. WHO also has broader [guidelines on COI](#). Nevertheless, according to some scholars, the WHO guidance deviates from standard legal usage, is confusing in its analysis, and may even facilitate the creation of conflicted public-private partnerships (Rodwin 2018; Rodwin 2020); and this framing can tend to ignore issues of power inherent in these relationships (Harris et al. 2021). Despite contestation (Ralston et al. 2020), these WHO Guidelines remain the major guidance on addressing COI in the field of public health. Regionally, the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) has provided some additional [guidance](#) to Member States in the Americas to assess the engagement with corporations when discussing policies or when delivering nutrition programs.

IUNS is made up of many different national nutrition associations, so it is not enough to engage the international group alone, but efforts must be made at national levels also. National associations are likely to need funds to carry out their work, and they may have links with potentially problematic funders that are not adequately transparent. The WHO COI guidelines are targeted at national level, so national nutrition associations must be made aware of them, and their capacity to use them strengthened, with the support of IUNS. In doing this, it must be acknowledged that moving away from these funders may affect the operations of national associations as well as the IUNS itself.

Running events without COI

With specific reference to nutrition events, several recent examples have shown that it is possible to shield academic and public health nutrition venues from actors that might have compromised interests and can negatively impact discussions and decisions. Several academic groups have guidance and principles on how to engage with food industry corporations, and multiple examples exist of nutrition conferences using funding models aiming explicitly to avoid COI in its broadest sense (see Box 2). We note therefore that it is possible to reconcile the needs of an event such as IUNS-ICN to fund itself, and the ethical and practical imperative to practice what we preach on transforming food systems to support health and nutrition. There are several proven funding models that avoid some of the key COI issues, with strong values and policies agreed from the start.

Box 2: Examples of funding modalities avoiding COI in its broadest sense

The [International Congress of Nutrition and Dietetics \(ICND\) 2021](#) in South Africa had a progressive sponsorship policy with scoring categories whereby organisers avoided all BMS, SSB, fast-food and, to a great extent, UPF companies (despite receiving a legal letter from the largest global BMS company warning that they would sue if they were not let in as an exhibitor). In taking this approach, the ICND 2021 congress made a substantial profit as well as embodying values of health and transparency.

Since 2016 the [Agriculture, Nutrition & Health \(ANH\) Academy](#) – a global network of 8000+ researchers, practitioners and policymakers in 140+ countries led by the [IMMANA programme](#) – in partnership with national universities and organisations, has been organising its annual conference. Between 2016-2019 the event rotated between African and Asian countries in order to lower barriers to participation. To further lower barriers, the five-day event has been free to attend in person, subject to a nominal fee only for those who could contribute. To achieve this, the conference operates on a donor-funded model (UK Aid and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - which IMMANA acknowledges are not unproblematic in themselves) with any budget shortfalls met through fundraising and COI-free partnerships developed by the ANH Academy secretariat. This model relies on a myriad of in-kind contributions, from academics reviewing abstract submissions to interested organisations funding researcher time to attend. This reflects the value that the global ANH community places on scientific exchange that is a) free of corporate commercial influence, b) fosters equity in participation, and c) provides a public good.

The [Congress of the Latin American Society of Nutrition \(SLAN\)](#), held in Mexico in 2018, adopted a position on the management of COI that has been maintained from that date to the present. SLAN 2021-2023 signed a declaration indicating that pre-congress activities, such as the organization and holding of the Congress in Cuenca, Ecuador in 2023, are being carried out free from COI. Here are some actions that SLAN organizers have recognized that can assist in holding such conferences free from COI:

- First, when negotiating funds for research, a budget item must be included that ensures that low-income country researchers have the resources to attend international events to present and discuss their findings.

- Second, at both national and local levels, there are tourism institutions, local universities, and companies not linked to the food and beverage industry that may be interested in supporting the congress or various scientific events, especially when foreign participants may be encouraged to add tourism to their trip.
- Third, there are local organizations that promote the production and consumption of foods produced locally by small scale producers for whom space in a congress is an excellent opportunity to show or sell their products, with which there is mutual gain.
- Fourth, congresses should not display luxuries and expensive exhibitions. Instead, other local industries not related to the food and beverage industry can be invited to participate in the congress to promote their products, for which they pay a fee according to the size of the space they would like to have for advertising or displays.
- Fifth, local artisans produce souvenirs and hand-made items and can be invited to pay a small fee and participate in available spaces.
- Finally, to decrease the cost of the event for organizers and participants, congresses can be held on the campus of a public university that has required infrastructure, including dormitory facilities that do not charge the fees that hotels typically require.

The World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA) conferences have had very clear [policies and principles](#) of non-engagement with any food and beverage industries. WPHNA abides by UN human rights covenants, especially the right to health, food and to education of all, of course including women, children, minorities, people with special abilities, as well as the rights of nature. They stand by saying “In its work, WPHNA will not be funded, sponsored, supported or influenced by corporations, companies and related organizations whose products, practices or policies are harmful to public health or nutritional status.” The World Nutrition Rio Conference was its first major international meeting without funding from conflicted sources, followed by Cape Town 2016 and Brisbane 2020 (online only). The conferences have been funded by participants’ fees, and donations of non-conflicted organizations such as the Ministries of Health of Brazil, Australia and some Australian States; the University of the Western Cape’s School of Public Health; and in-kind contributions of personnel from host organisations to Congress organisation tasks.

COI and the shaping of conferences through vested interests are not only about funding, of course, though this is a significant part of the problem. The ANH Academy for instance notes that COI may also exist through other means such as the presence of industry groups or individuals on scientific committees or planning groups, as well as industry-supported seconded staff. ANH Academy places the same emphasis on these concerns as it does on financial contributions when it comes to eliminating commercial influence. These actions are seen as critical for the ANH Academy (a scientific network and platform that obtains and maintains its legitimacy from the global multi-sectoral community). It is a community that is wary of the clandestine influence that industry exerts on research and policy, which in turn impacts the nutrition and health of populations worldwide. That is not to say that the Academy does not acknowledge the diverse roles that the private sector plays across food systems, but rather that these should be separated from domains where science and policy for public good meet.

A key consideration in thinking through how to fund nutrition events (including those highlighted above) is to ensure that early career participants and those from low-income countries, can still participate, even without access to the funds that more established academics or institutions may have. The ANH Academy for instance includes in its donor funding model a travel bursary scheme designed to sponsor early-career speakers from low- and middle-income countries, as well as costs for panelists, keynote speakers and networking events. The ICND and WPHNA, in turning a small profit from their non-COI sponsorship, have been able to support bursaries also. The SLAN event noted that when negotiating funds for research, an item must be included that ensures that low-income country researchers have the resources to attend international events; and that at the local level there may be tourism institutions, local universities and companies not linked to the food and beverage industry that may be interested in supporting scientific events. Various international agencies such as Canadian IDRC and certain foundations may be willing to support attendance at congresses by low-income country participants, as has occurred at all WPHNA Congress events.

Conclusions

In this paper we have outlined ideas and evidence around COI in nutrition; highlighted the case of IUNS-ICN; and suggested some ways forward as a contribution to the field. Strengthening COI policy and its implementation is a key solution; and several workable examples of funding meetings and their attendance without the involvement of food industry companies have been cited. As a final suggestion, we would submit that the IUNS or other nutrition bodies might set up a working group to determine whether COI has undermined the IUNS scientific mission over the decades, through rigorous historical and policy research, so that further lessons might be learned.

We acknowledge that COI issues can become complex, with ethical issues often opaque – particularly around the imperative for low-income countries to participate equally – so exactly the best way to go is not always clear or agreed to by all relevant actors. Further exploration and sharing of models that work are needed. But acknowledging and raising awareness of the corporate capture of many relevant public spaces in our areas of expertise is always appropriate. We urge the community to come together to find ways to eliminate these forms of COI, while at the same time recognising that the problem is emblematic of much wider problems in research funding and inequitable global institutions. These problems are associated with unequal resourcing of science and the historical antecedents of uneven economic development, which, in itself, has links to the conditions that facilitate the concentration of corporate power. Addressing this in nutrition conferences is a small but vital step, in which all nutrition researchers can be involved.

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