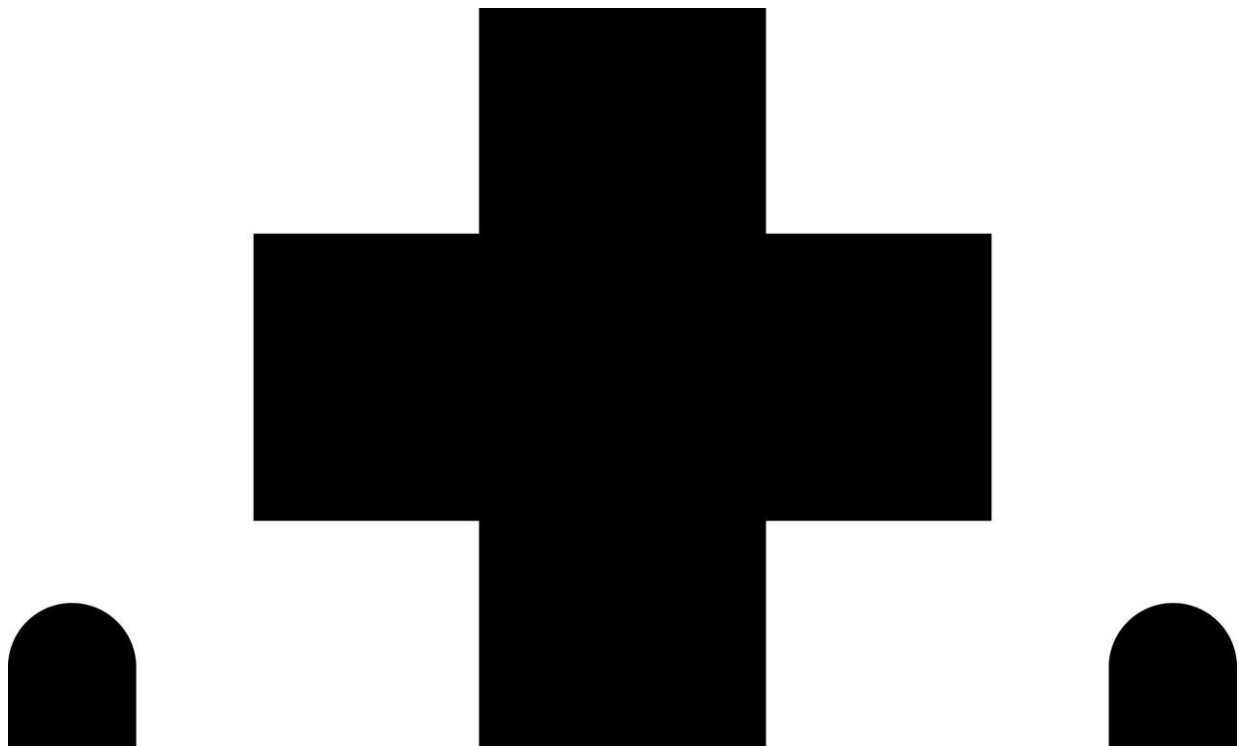


Industry uses non-profit organisation to campaign against public health policies

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A new study shows how a non-profit research organisation has been deployed by its backers from major food and beverage corporations to push industry-favourable positions to policy makers and international bodies under the guise of neutral scientific endeavour.

The study, published today in the journal *Globalization and Health*, analysed over 17,000 pages of emails obtained through Freedom of Information requests made between 2015 and 2018. The documents captured exchanges between academics at US universities and senior figures at a non-profit organisation called the International Life Science Institute, or ILSI.

Comprising of 18 bodies, each of which cover a specific topic or part of the globe, ILSI has always maintained its independence and scientific rigour, despite being funded by multinational corporations such as Nestle, General Mills, Mars Inc, Monsanto, and Coca-Cola.

Founded by former Coca-Cola senior vice president Alex Malaspina in 1978, ILSI states on its website that none of its bodies "conduct lobbying activities or make policy recommendations". As a non-profit organisation ILSI is currently exempt from taxation under US Internal Revenue codes.

However, researchers from the University of Cambridge, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University of Bocconi, and US Right to Know, found emails explicitly discussing tactics for countering public health policies around sugar reduction, as "[T]his threat to our business is serious".

These include exchanges with an epidemiology professor at the University of Washington, as well as the US Centre for Disease Control's then director of heart disease and stroke prevention, all strategising how best to approach the World Health Organisation's then Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan, to shift her position on sugar-sweetened products.

"It has been previously suggested that the International Life Sciences Institute is little more than a pseudo-scientific front group for some of the biggest multinational food and drink corporations globally," said the

study lead author Dr. Sarah Steele, a researcher at Cambridge's Department of Politics and International Studies.

"Our findings 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."

In one email, Malaspina, who also served as long-time president at ILSI, described new US guidelines bolstering child and adult education on limiting sugar intake as a "real disaster!". He writes: "We have to consider how to become ready to mount a strong defence". Suzanne Harris, then executive director of ILSI, was among the email's recipients.

James Hill, then director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado, was involved in a separate exchange on the issue of defending industry from the health consequences of its products. Hill argues for greater funding for ILSI from industry as part of "dealing aggressively with this issue". He writes that, if companies keep their heads down, "our opponents will win and we will all lose".

The FOI emails also suggest ILSI constructs campaigns favourable to artificial sweeteners. Emails reveal Malaspina passing on praise from another former ILSI President to a former Coca-Cola employee and the Professor, describing both as "the architects to plan and execute the studies showing saccharine is not a carcinogen", resulting in the reversal of many government bans.

The FOI responses suggest that ILSI operates strategically with other industry-funded entities, including IFIC, a science communication non-profit organisation. "IFIC is a kind of sister entity to ILSI," writes Malaspina. "ILSI generates the scientific facts and IFIC communicates

them to the media and public."

"The emails suggest that both ILSI and IFIC act to counter unfavourable policies and positions, while promoting industry-favourable science under a disguised front, including to the media," said Steele.

In fact, the emails suggest ILSI considers sanctioning its own regional subsidiaries when they fail to promote the agreed industry-favourable messaging. Correspondence reveals discussion of suspending ILSI's Mexico branch from the parent organisation after soft drink taxation was debated at a conference it sponsored. Mexico has one of the highest adult obesity rates in the world.

Email conversations between Malaspina and the CDC's Barbara Bowman are open about the need to get the WHO to "start working with ILSI again" and to take into account "lifestyle changes" as well as sugary foods when combatting obesity.

Further exchanges between Malaspina and Washington Professor Adam Drewnowski support ILSI's role in this. Drewnowski writes of Dr. Chan that "we ought to start with some issue where ILSI and WHO are in agreement" to help "get her to the table".

In a further email, Malaspina points out that he had meetings with the two previous heads of the WHO, going back to the mid-90s, and that if they do not start a dialogue with Dr. Chan "she will continue to blast us with significant negative consequences on a global basis".

The tide has begun to turn against ILSI in recent years. The WHO quietly ended their "special relations" with ILSI in 2017, and ILSI's links to the European Food Safety Authority were the subject of enquiry at the European Parliament. The CDC's Bowman retired in 2016, in the wake of revelations about her close ties with ILSI. Last year, long-time

ILSI funder Mars Inc. stopped supporting the organisation. Much of the study's correspondence precedes these events.

"It becomes clear from the emails and forwards that ILSI is seen as central to pushing pro-industry content to international organisations to support approaches that uncouple sugary foods and obesity," added Steele.

"Our analysis of ILSI serves as a caution to those involved in global health governance to be wary of putatively independent research groups, and to practice due diligence before relying upon their funded studies."

More information: Sarah Steele et al, Are industry-funded charities promoting "advocacy-led studies" or "evidence-based science"?: a case study of the International Life Sciences Institute, *Globalization and Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s12992-019-0478-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-019-0478-6)

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