

How an “International Shadowy Group” Is Influencing India’s Food Policy

By [Great Game India](#)

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Region: [Asia](#)

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International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), an American nonprofit with an innocuous sounding name has been quietly infiltrating Indian government’s health and nutrition bodies influencing India’s food policy on behalf of the chemical industry.

New Food Packaging Labeling Rules

Last year the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) proposed to introduce a [traffic light labelling measure](#), with red spots being used to warn of high fat, sugar or salt content in packaged foods. The FSSAI said these would form the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2018.

The draft regulation states that packaged food manufacturers and firms are required to declare nutritional information such as calories (energy), total fat, trans-fat, total sugar and salt per serve, as well as per serve percentage contribution to the recommended dietary allowance (RDA).

The new label will be front-of-pack. Other requirements in the comprehensive set of guidelines include a symbol on the label indicating whether it is vegetarian or non-vegetarian food (a green triangle or brown circle, respectively).

Red list

Most significantly, it would be mandatory for food products with high fat, sugar or salt content to display a red-coloured mark on the front-of-pack label.

“The blocks of nutrients for “High Fat, Sugar and Salt” (HFSS) food shall be coloured red in the case where the value of energy (kcal) from total sugar is more than 10 percent of the total energy (kcal) provided by the 100 g/100 ml of the product; the value of energy (kcal) from trans-fat is more than 1 percent of the total energy (kcal) provided by the 100 g/100 ml of the product; and total fat or sodium content provided by the 100 g/100 ml of the product is more than the threshold values,” the draft regulation stated.

It added: “The Food Authority may introduce colour coding system in addition to marking of foods as ‘Red’ within the specified thresholds from time to time.” Furthermore, it stated that it would be prohibited for HFSS food products to be advertised, in any form, to children.

Mandatory GM labelling

In a first, the draft regulation also stated a need to declare genetically modified ingredients on the labels. “All food products having total Genetically Engineered (GE) ingredients of 5

percent or more shall be labelled,” it said. “The total GE ingredients shall be of top three ingredients in terms of their percentage in the product. The labelling shall be as: ‘Contains GMO/Ingredients derived from GMO!’.”

Recently, the FSSAI also proposed introducing a traffic light labelling scheme for foods sold in school canteens and vending machines, in a bid to curb consumption of sugary drinks, heavily processed foods and confectionery by children.

The draft also stated that authorities will ensure that there will be no sale of high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) content foods such as deep-fried foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, processed foods and confectionery in or within 50m of the school premises. In Western Australia, a similar traffic light labelling policy for food and drinks provided in some schools has had a positive impact on children’s health.

Expert Review Panel

Soon after an expert panel was set-up to review India’s proposed new packaged foods labelling rules. FSSAI established the three-member committee after food firms expressed concerns about the proposals.

However, Pawan Agarwal, FSSAI CEO said the plans would now be looked at again, despite the draft already being sent to the Health Ministry for finalisation. Industry stakeholders have expressed concerns,” he said. “So we have decided to set-up a panel of experts with health and nutrition background to look into the draft regulations.”

When the Indian government bowed to powerful food companies last year and [postponed its decision](#) to put red warning labels on unhealthy packaged food, officials also sought to placate critics of the delay by creating an expert panel to review the proposed labeling system, which would have gone far beyond what other countries have done in the battle to combat soaring obesity rates.

Dr. Boindala Sesikeran

The man chosen to head the three-person committee was Dr. Boindala Sesikeran who is a veteran nutritionist and former adviser to Nestle. However, Dr. Sesikeran is also a trustee of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), an American nonprofit with an innocuous sounding name that has been quietly infiltrating government health and nutrition bodies around the world.

Dr. Sesikeran’s leadership role on the food labeling committee has raised questions about whether regulators will ultimately be swayed by processed food manufacturers who say the red warning labels would hurt sales. “What could possibly go wrong?” Amit Srivastava, the coordinator of the advocacy group India Resource Center, asked sarcastically. “To have a covert food lobby group deciding public health policy is wrong and a blatant conflict of interest.”

In many ways, Dr. Sesikeran is the ideal ILSI recruit: a former top government official and marquee nutritionist. In the seven years since he retired as director of India’s National Institute of Nutrition, Dr. Sesikeran has advised companies like Nestle, the Japanese food giant Ajinomoto and the Italian chocolate maker Ferrero.

How [#WorldBank](#)'s Economic Chakravayuh Is Trapping Indian Farmers explains eminent economist [@Devinder_Sharma](#) <https://t.co/GwSKq95sum>

— GreatGameIndia (@GreatGameIndia) [July 29, 2017](#)

Since 2015, Dr. Sesikeran has been a trustee of both ILSI-India and the organization's global operation based in Washington, and he is a frequent speaker at ILSI events, where he has lectured about the benefits of artificial sweeteners and genetically modified crops. The ILSI positions are unpaid, but they come with all-expense-paid travel to meetings around the world.

Last year, when the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India needed someone to lead its panel on warning labels, officials chose Dr. Sesikeran. Pawan Kumar Agarwal, the authority's chief executive, had [spoken at ILSI seminars](#) alongside Dr. Sesikeran, and in 2016, he tapped Dr. Sesikeran for a committee weighing the pros and cons of genetically modified mustard plants.

In addition to Dr. Sesikeran's roles, Dr. Debabrata Kanungo, an ILSI member and former official with the Indian Ministry of Health, sits on two scientific food panels: one considering the safety of pesticide residues, and another on additives in processed foods. Ms. Sinha, ILSI-India's executive director and an economist by training, briefly served on [a government nutrition panel](#) along with Dr. Sesikeran, but both were removed after they failed to declare their relationship with ILSI as a conflict of interest.

International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI)

The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) is a global nonprofit science organization headquartered in Washington, DC, United States. It was founded in 1978 by Alex Malaspina, a former Coca-Cola executive, and it is financed by food and chemical industries such as BASF, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, McDonald's, Monsanto, Syngenta and Pepsi.

Created four decades ago by a top Coca-Cola executive, the institute now has branches in 17 countries. It is almost entirely funded by Goliaths of the agribusiness, food and pharmaceutical industries, [reported the New York Times](#) in a detailed piece.

The organization, which championed tobacco interests during the 1980s and 1990s in Europe and the United States, has more recently expanded its activities in Asia and Latin America, regions that provide a growing share of food company profits. It has been especially active in China, India and Brazil, the world's first, second and sixth most populous nations.

In China, the institute [shares both staff and office space](#) with the agency responsible for combating the country's epidemic of obesity-related illness. In Brazil, ILSI representatives occupy seats on a number of food and nutrition panels that were previously reserved for university researchers.

The organization rejects allegations that it works to advance the interests of its corporate members. "Under no circumstance does ILSI protect industry from being affected by disadvantageous policy and laws," the group said in a statement.

After decades largely operating under the radar, ILSI is coming under increasing scrutiny by health advocates in the United States and abroad who say it is little more than a front group advancing the interests of the 400 corporate members that provide its \$17 million budget, among them Coca-Cola, DuPont, PepsiCo, General Mills and Danone.

Last year, the candy maker [Mars withdrew](#) from ILSI, saying it could no longer support an organization that funds what a Mars executive described as “advocacy-led studies.” In 2015, ILSI lost its special access to governing bodies at the World Health Organization after critics raised questions about its industry ties.

In the 40 years since its creation, ILSI has methodically cultivated allies in academia and government through the conferences it sponsors around the world, and by recruiting influential scientists to committees that work on issues like food safety, agrochemicals or the promotion of probiotic supplements.

“Control oil and you control nations; control food and you control the people.”
– Henry Kissinger, 56th United States Secretary of State

How the Rockefeller's Grain Cartel took over our Agricultural production through the [#GreenRevolution](#) in India.<https://t.co/BIMNIqbBuW>

— GreatGameIndia (@GreatGameIndia) [January 27, 2019](#)

Although conference topics seldom touch on politically contentious matters, critics say they serve a larger purpose: cultivating scientists and officials who might normally avoid an event directly sponsored by McDonald’s or Kellogg’s.

“It also helps that they are always held at five-star hotels, and that they serve you lunch,” said Dr. Shweta Khandelwal, a nutritionist with the nonprofit Public Health Foundation of India. “We certainly don’t have the money to pay for people’s lunch.”

As it expands across the globe, ILSI is drawing unflattering attention. Over the past year, [researchers have documented](#) how the organization’s China affiliate helped shape anti-obesity education campaigns that stressed physical activity over dietary changes, a [strategy long espoused by Coca-Cola](#) that critics say was designed to protect corporate profits.

In Beijing, relations between ILSI and the government are so intertwined that ILSI’s top leaders double as senior officials at China’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Through freedom of information requests, authors of [a recent study](#) in the United States obtained emails between ILSI trustees, its corporate members and the group’s allies in academia urging them to step up their fight against the [W.H.O.’s increasingly tough stance](#) on sugar.

In one exchange in 2015, Alex Malaspina, the founder of ILSI, sought suggestions from ILSI trustees and an [official at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta](#) about how to influence Dr. Margaret Chan, then the W.H.O.’s director-general.

“We must find a way to start a dialogue,” wrote Mr. Malaspina, who retired as ILSI’s president in 2001 but was still in frequent contact with its staff, trustees and corporate members. “If not, she will continue to blast us with significant negative consequences on a

global basis. This threat to our business is serious.”

James Hill, an ILSI trustee and expert on weight management, responded, “I agree that we need to do something to try and prevent W.H.O. from taking a completely anti-food industry stance in the obesity field.”

In a statement, ILSI, based in Washington, said claims that it sought to influence the W.H.O. were “unfounded and inaccurate.” Although it did not provide further details or respond to specific questions about its activities overseas, the organization said in [another statement](#) that ILSI entities are allowed to provide regulators “information relating to factual matters within ILSI’s scientific expertise.”

In addition to its far-flung offices, ILSI runs a [research foundation](#) and [an institute](#) focused on health and environmental issues that is largely funded by the chemical industry. It also publishes the academic journal [Nutrition Reviews](#) and organizes scores of scientific conferences around the world.

Much of ILSI’s work in recent years has focused on fostering relationships in developing countries.

“Emerging economies are where the action is,” said Laura A. Schmidt, a professor of health policy at the University of California, San Francisco. “These are places where the health infrastructure is less established and populations may be less informed about health hazards. If corporations can get in on the ground floor, they can shape the narratives and policies around unhealthy products.”

The organization’s annual report and website brim with assurances about its commitment to transparency. According to its [code of ethics](#), ILSI projects “must address issues of broad public health interest.”

But the organization has a long history of championing corporate interests. In [2001](#), a W.H.O. report criticized the group for its role in financing studies that cast doubt on the dangers of smoking, and in 2006, the agency barred ILSI from activities involving the setting of standards for food and water after its stealth efforts to sway policy in favor of industry [came to light](#).

Over the past decade, ILSI has received more than \$2 million from chemical companies, among them Monsanto, which was bought by Bayer last year. In 2016, ILSI came under [withering criticism](#) after a U.N. committee issued a ruling that glyphosate, the key ingredient in Monsanto’s weed killer Roundup, was “probably not carcinogenic,” contradicting an [earlier report](#) by the W.H.O.’s cancer agency. The committee, it turned out, was led by two ILSI officials, one of them Alan Boobis, the vice president of [ILSI-Europe](#) who has done consulting work for the chemical sector.

[#DelhiAirPollution](#) problem started right after controversial [#USAID #Monsanto](#) backed law was implemented. Before this the problem was limited to vehicular & industrial pollution and there were no reports of entire metropolitan area being enveloped by smoke <https://t.co/NpAbt4OY6Q>

— GreatGameIndia (@GreatGameIndia) [November 4, 2019](#)

[Monsanto along with USAID](#) is also responsible for influencing disastrous agricultural policies causing severe [air pollution in New Delhi](#). Delhi's air pollution problem started right after the controversial [USAID and Monsanto backed law](#) was implemented. Before this law was passed, the problem in Delhi was limited to vehicular and industrial pollution and there were no reports of the entire metropolitan area being enveloped by smoke. Over a period of several years, it has used the fraudulent excuse of preventing the decline of groundwater to push their agenda. More information on how Monsanto is waging biological warfare by infiltrated Indian government is detailed in the book [India in Cognitive Dissonance](#).

In India, ILSI's expanding influence has coincided with mounting rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease and [especially diabetes](#), which affects more than 70 million Indians. Experts say that number could soar to 123 million in the next decade as more people embrace processed foods high in fat, sugar and salt.

The government has responded with bold measures, [including a 40 percent tax](#) on sugar-sweetened soda introduced in 2017. But other efforts, including a ban on junk food sales in and around schools, have stalled amid opposition from food and beverage companies.

The Rs 1.4 Trillion Plan To Destroy India's Agriculture <https://t.co/jSiZwZ9R89>
via [@GreatGameIndia](#)

— nikhil wagle (@waglenikhil) [January 9, 2018](#)

"The power of this industry is even greater than that of the tobacco industry," said Sunita Narain, the director of the Center for Science and Environment in New Delhi. Four years ago, she took part in a government panel on warning labels whose report was promptly shelved. "But they are so shadowy that these players don't dare come to the table representing the food industry, because no one would accept Coca-Cola or Pepsi in the room."

Even as its influence in the developing world grows, ILSI has faced occasional pushback. An ILSI-funded research project on childhood obesity in Argentina was canceled three years ago after parents whose children were enrolled in the study learned more about the organization. And in 2015, ILSI officials in Washington shuttered ILSI-Mexico after the news media there wrote unfavorably about a conference it organized on sweeteners.

Many of the speakers, it turned out, were well-known advocates for the beverage industry, and at the time, the Mexican government was considering modifications to a newly enacted tax on sugary drinks.

It did not help that the head of ILSI-Mexico was Raul Portillo, a former Coca-Cola executive in charge of regulatory and scientific affairs.

In [an email](#) to one of the group's trustees, Mr. Malaspina, ILSI's founder, called the incident a "mess" and said he was saddened by the decision to suspend ILSI-Mexico. "I hope we have now reached bottom and eventually we will recover as Coke and ILSI are concerned," he wrote.

The [suspension](#), it turns out, lasted less than a year, and ILSI-Mexico is up and running with a new executive director: J. Eduardo Cervantes, the former director of public affairs at Coca-Cola of Mexico.

Besides traditional media, even the scientific community has come out in force against ILSI. The British Medical Journal (BMJ) recently published a study that detailed how Coca Cola has shaped obesity science and policy in China. In her report, author Dr Susan Greenhalgh, a Harvard academic and China scholar says “in China, Coca-Cola has exerted its influence since 1999 through a Chinese offshoot of ILSI”.

ILSI Sponsored Survey

Recently, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and under it the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), had [conducted a survey](#) on consumption levels of sugar in seven Indian metro cities. The survey, which was sponsored by the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), was well represented in the media, with stories such as “[Men like sweet, Women love sweeter](#)”.

In a shocker, a US lab report reveals that premium brands of processed iodised salt including [#TataSalt](#) sold in India allegedly contain alarming levels of carcinogenic and harmful components like potassium ferrocyanide. <https://t.co/yyd2wRByRX>

— GreatGameIndia (@GreatGameIndia) [June 26, 2019](#)

The Alliance Against Conflict of Interest (AACI) has strongly objected to the country’s top health agency conducting a survey sponsored by them. AACI is an alliance of organisations and individuals working in various sectors – doctors, lawyers, women’s and children’s health groups. In it’s letter written to the ICMR and the NIN under it, the alliance called it an “incompatible partnership” and said that “ILSI has been pursuing policy influence in India and elsewhere, in particular, with respect to sugary foods and beverages”.

The letter written by AACI points out the obvious conflict of interest in having ILSI sponsor studies conducted by government health bodies, when they have been caught in nefarious activities trying to influence public health opinion and policy across the globe.

“We wonder what strategic direction ICMR-NIN, the premier research agency of India, is giving to the people of India when this survey’s findings projected in the media may potentially perpetuate more sugar consumption while pretending to be concerned about non-communicable diseases,” the letter by the AACI reads.

Concerned about increasing the non-communicable disease burden in India, AACI has urged the government to adopt and follow a higher standard of principles when associating itself with organisations such as ILSI. They have asked the ICMR to respond to questions such as conclusions of the study, how was a conflict of interest managed and plans to use this study for policy development in public interest.

Niti Aayog Partner

The true nature of ILSI has been publicly made available through several articles, exposés and reports in the media as well as in scientific journals. Surprisingly, organisations in India such as the ICMR are still conducting surveys sponsored by ILSI and two years ago, even [Niti Aayog had chosen to include ILSI](#) in their working group on nutrition policies.

There is a dramatic figure that has circulated for past year saying that 21 major Indian cities are expected to run out of groundwater by 2020. It has turned out that Niti Aayog's report on India's water crisis is based on zombie statistics via [@jslaternychttps://t.co/hyTLmONQf3](https://t.co/hyTLmONQf3)

— GreatGameIndia (@GreatGameIndia) [June 29, 2019](#)

One would have thought the government would do a background check on those it involved, to safeguard against vested interests hijacking public policy. In spite of such abundant evidence of multinational companies and their fronts like ILSI playing a dubious role in defeating or diluting regulation of the food, beverage and even tobacco industry, we are continuing to see several ministries and top government bodies associate with ILSI.

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