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Intro:

Alliance with UNICEF in question

EVEN though the Ministry of Women and Child Development is yet to take a decision on the conflict of interest between public-private partnerships and government policies, the ministry has launched a five-year programme on child welfare in collaboration with UNICEF in seven states. UNICEF, which often implements child nutrition programmes in India, is involved in many public-private partnerships involving commercial entities.

In July this year, the health ministry asked the women and child development ministry to address the concerns raised in a letter from the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI). The network had pointed out that there was a conflict of interest in the collaboration between UNICEF and Global Alliance for Infant Nutrition (GAIN), an NGO which is promoting market solutions to malnutrition. Danone, a baby food company that has broken the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, is on GAIN's board. This indirectly links UNICEF with baby food industry.

The problem was revealed when nutrition experts questioned the link between GAIN and UNICEF at a follow-up meeting to the 2007 nutrition conclave held in Chennai. It was decided that these experts would collaborate with UNICEF and come up with a statement on conflict of interest. But Victor Aguayo, chief, child nutrition and development, UNICEF, refused to sign the final agreement.

David Clark, legal expert with UNICEF, pointed out that the agreement would mean that the UN agency would not be able to collaborate with the baby food industry, and this would affect programmes in which UNICEF was involved with local producers of complementary food who did not violate either the Code or the IMS Act, 1992, which regulates the baby food industry.

Arun Gupta, national coordinator, BPNI, contended that the agreement would not affect UNICEF's nutrition programmes as small-scale manufacturers do not come into the category of industry. At the same time, Gupta said, UNICEF should have a system in place to ensure that manufacturers did not violate regulations after entering into partnership with it.

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