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Commentary

The imprints of sponsorship: The case of UNITAR's Breastfeeding Education Initiative

Laura Piaggio[1,*], Mercedes Banegas[1], Florencia Guma[1], Belén Nuñez[1], Ignacio Porras[1]

[1] Technical Team for the Protection and Promotion of Human Lactation – SANAR Foundation

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In 2023, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) launched the Breastfeeding Education Initiative (BFEI). The initiative offered an online course on breastfeeding, "*The Magic Drop*", aimed at the general public, health professionals, and policymakers. It also included regional training opportunities for health teams and collaborations with governmental sectors. Furthermore, it established a panel of experts from diverse countries and disciplines.

The launch took place almost simultaneously with the publication of the new Lancet Breastfeeding Series (February 2023) and the convening of the First Global Congress on the Implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, organized by WHO and UNICEF (June 2023). These initiatives might appear to be synergistic efforts, except for one detail: the BFEI was undertaken in partnership with Danone, an infant formula manufacturer.

The Initiative was structured around the following pillars:

- THE ONLINE COURSE *"The Magic Drop: supporting mothers along the journey"*, with the first module made available in 14 languages.
- ADDITIONAL ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCES, including webinars, micro-learning modules, and a digital library. Between September and November 2024, three thematic webinars were held on Responsive Feeding, Mastitis, and Vulnerable Groups.
- REGIONAL CONFERENCES AND TRAINING-OF-TRAINERS PROGRAMS. Several regional events were convened across Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and Europe:
  - Workshop in Dakar, Senegal, March 2023
  - Workshop in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, December 2023
  - Regional Breastfeeding Forum in San Salvador, El Salvador, July 2024
  - Conference on Breastfeeding Education and Training-of-Trainers Workshop in Europe, London, March 2025
- ENGAGEMENT WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS, including government agencies and professional associations.



Source: Unitar website

HOW DID WE COME TO KNOW ABOUT UNITAR'S BFEI PLATFORM?

One of SANAR Foundation's lines of work is the monitoring of food industry interference. Since 2021, the Foundation has been documenting the influence of the ultra-processed food industry on public policy in Argentina (FIC Argentina et al. 2024). In 2023, it initiated a research program focused on the corporate political activity of the commercial milk formula industry in the country, utilizing recommended methods, among others (Mialon et al. 2015; Tanrikulu et al. 2020; Ulucanlar et al. 2023). Within this framework, one of

[1]The research project entitled "Interference of the Commercial Milk Formula Industry in Policies for the Protection of Breastfeeding in Argentina", developed by members of SANAR Foundation and the Argentine Association of Public Health, was approved in November 2023 by the Health Research Directorate of the Ministry of Health of Argentina, Registry NRU 341 (Fundación SANAR y AASAP, 2023). However, the funding was never disbursed due to severe budgetary cuts to the scientific and health systems implemented by the government of President Javier Milei beginning in December 2023. Despite the absence of financial support, the research team continued monitoring the corporate political activity of the commercial milk formula industry.

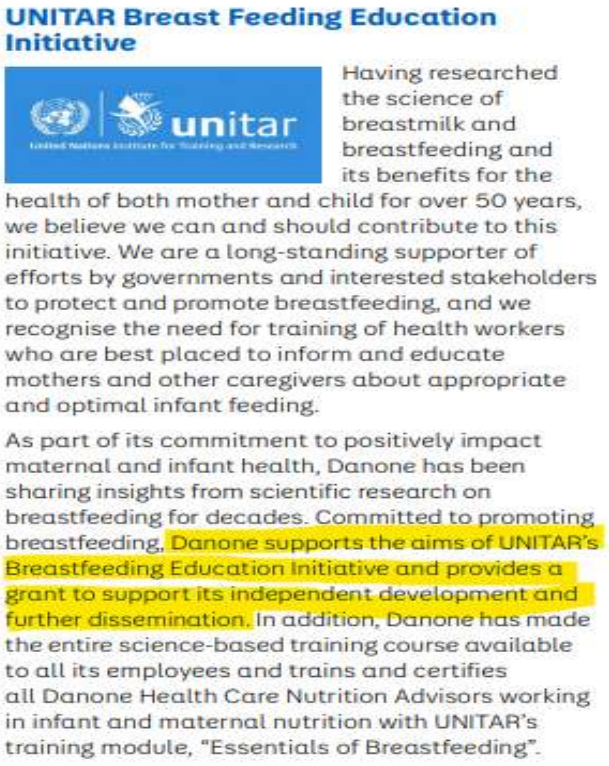
*Corresponding author: sanar.nutricion@gmail.com

the activities undertaken was the systematic review of global, regional, and local reports and annual statements published by the infant formula companies operating in Argentina (Danone/Nutricia-Bagó, Nestlé, and the local Roemmers Group).

It was in this context that we noted, in the Danone Health Journey Report 2022–2023, its presentation of the partnership with UNITAR for the development of the Breastfeeding Education Initiative, framed as a corporate social responsibility action within the company's food agenda commitments. The initiative is described as "the first multisectoral educational initiative of its kind, aimed at positively impacting maternal and child health more broadly. The breastfeeding education program is implemented and made accessible through UNITAR's platform and includes the training course 'The Magic Drop: Foundations of Breastfeeding', available in 12 languages."

In a 2024 corporate report, the company announced the continuation of its collaboration with UNITAR to sustain the BFEI Initiative: "Danone continued its collaboration with UNITAR on the Breastfeeding Education Initiative, to help increase breastfeeding initiation and duration rates by supporting health professionals and helping to build parents' and caregivers' knowledge and confidence to breastfeed."

After documenting this sponsorship activity, the research team examined the Initiative's website, and two members completed the "Magic Drop" course. In addition, the dissemination of activities through UNITAR's social media channels was systematically reviewed.



UNITAR Breast Feeding Education Initiative

unitar

Having researched the science of breastmilk and breastfeeding and its benefits for the health of both mother and child for over 50 years, we believe we can and should contribute to this initiative. We are a long-standing supporter of efforts by governments and interested stakeholders to protect and promote breastfeeding, and we recognise the need for training of health workers who are best placed to inform and educate mothers and other caregivers about appropriate and optimal infant feeding.

As part of its commitment to positively impact maternal and infant health, Danone has been sharing insights from scientific research on breastfeeding for decades. Committed to promoting breastfeeding, Danone supports the aims of UNITAR's Breastfeeding Education Initiative and provides a grant to support its independent development and further dissemination. In addition, Danone has made the entire science-based training course available to all its employees and trains and certifies all Danone Health Care Nutrition Advisors working in infant and maternal nutrition with UNITAR's training module, "Essentials of Breastfeeding".

Source: Danone health journey report, 2022-2023 Edition, p. 26

THE IMPRINT OF SPONSORSHIP…

We were able to observe the effects of the sponsorship of this Initiative across four interconnected dimensions.

First, in the composition of the expert panel, we documented the participation of professionals with prior links to Danone/Nutricia-Bagó: Bernd Stahl (Director of Research and Human Milk Analytical Science at Danone Nutricia Research), Gabriel Vindelora (technological liaison and marketing activities with Danone/Nutricia-Bagó), Michael Abou-Dakn, María Carmen Collado, Moenie Van Der Kleyn, and Meng Mao (all four with presentations at scientific meetings financed by Danone/Nutricia-Bagó and with participation at the Danone Nutricia Campus, a training platform for healthcare professionals launched by Nutricia in 2021).

Second, we documented that Danone sponsorship almost certainly influenced the content of the educational program rather substantially. In the "Magic Drop" course, any reference to the deceptive and unethical marketing practices of commercial milk formula companies was avoided when analysing the characteristics of environments that are unsupportive of breastfeeding, despite the abundant scientific evidence documenting their significant negative impact. Furthermore, the course omitted information that Article 4 of the Code requires the following to be included in educational and informational materials: the negative effects on breastfeeding of introducing partial bottle-feeding; the difficulty of reversing the decision not to breastfeed; the social and financial implications of using breast-milk substitutes; and the health risks posed by their unnecessary or improper use.

Instead, the following message was conveyed, implying a quasi-equivalence between breastfeeding and infant formula feeding: "If a mother and her partner decide to exclusively breastfeed or not, after having been properly advised about the importance of breastfeeding, health professionals should listen to the mother's reasons and provide her with sufficient evidence-based information about the circumstances and the possible consequences of each decision, as well as what the appropriate feeding options are in each case".

Third, by sponsoring an Initiative led by a body associated with the United Nations system, the company obtained "endorsement by association" (UNICEF, 2023), serving as an effective tool for corporate image "whitewashing" (WHO, 2024).

Finally, the workshops, forums, and conferences provided privileged access to professional organizations, government agencies, and decision-makers, potentially resulting in "endorsement by association" in those cases as well.

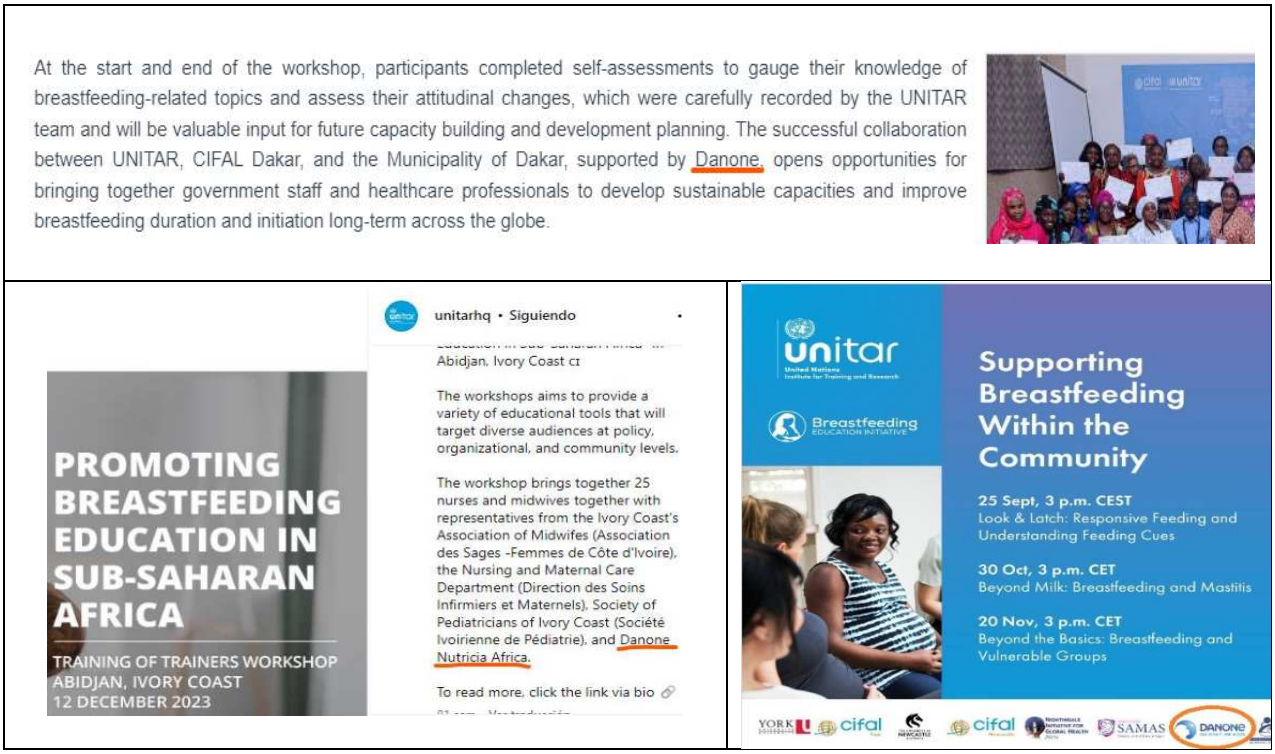
CONFLICTS OF INTEREST, CODE VIOLATIONS, AND TRANSPARENCY

Receiving funding from a company producing commercial milk formulas constitutes a serious violation of the Code[2] by UNITAR, a United Nations–associated entity.

[2] The term "*Code*" refers to the 1981 International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant Resolutions of the World Health Assembly, which form a unified body of regulations.



Source: Course "The magic drop" (Spanish version)



Source: UNITAR website and Instagram

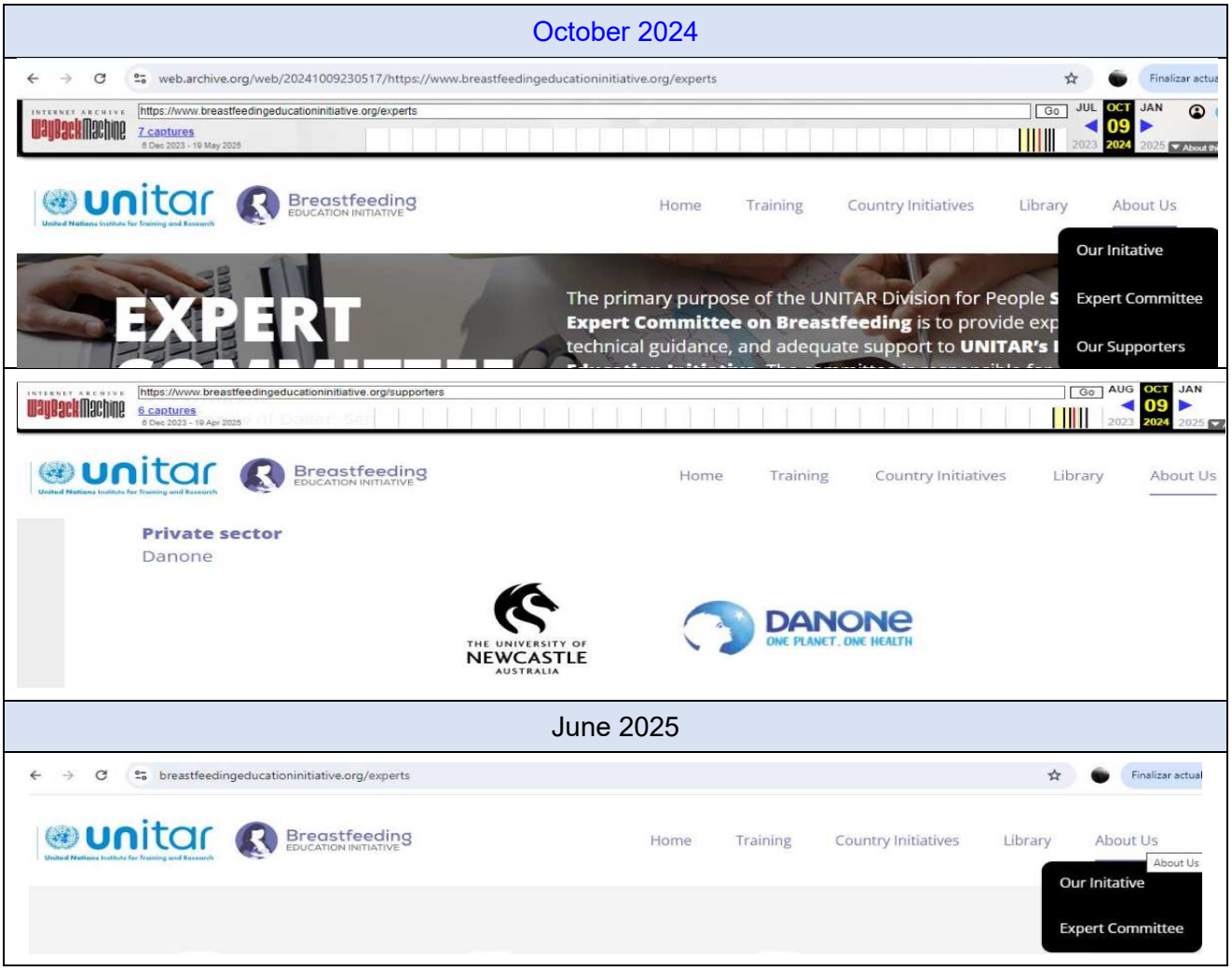
On one hand, it creates conflicts of interest, as the stated goal of the BFEI—to promote breastfeeding—is effectively hijacked and influenced by commercial interests. This conditioning operates: (1) in the dissemination of an approach aligned with the narrative promoted by breast-milk substitute producers (equating breastfeeding with formula feeding; omitting associated risks) (UNICEF, 2025), (2) in enabling corporate image "whitewashing," and (3) in facilitating access to health professionals and decision-makers, risking widespread "endorsement by association."

These actors are key to the protection of breastfeeding, which is why companies seek to co-opt their perspectives (Rollins et al. 2023). As noted, the BFEI facilitated the dissemination of an interpretive framework consistent with the companies' narrative.

At the same time, corporate involvement in the development of educational and informational materials is prohibited by the Code, both in its original version and in subsequent WHA Resolutions, which explicitly include the virtual environment and the sponsorship of conferences and training activities (WHA Resolution 69.9, 2016). Furthermore, the creation of educational websites with information on breastfeeding and child-rearing is explicitly addressed in the Guidance on the Regulation of Digital Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, approved in May of this year by WHA Resolution 78.18. Recommendation 1.4 states that "manufacturers of products covered by the Code, and entities acting on their behalf, should be prohibited from offering or providing advice, information (beyond product-specific information required by law), or education on infant

and young child care, nutrition, maternal nutrition, pregnancy, child development, health and wellbeing, or parenting—whether in static, dynamic, or interactive digital formats, including, among others, online learning courses…."

Notably, when revisiting the website in June 2025, we observed that the entities supporting the Initiative were no longer disclosed, as can be seen in the following screenshots from the "About Us" section of the website:



This commentary was initially intended to be entitled "Sweeping Sponsorship Under the Rug", in order to denounce the lack of transparency regarding funding sources while the Initiative's contents, activities, and expert group—several of whose members had conflicts of interest due to ties with Danone/Nutricia-Bagó—remained unchanged.

However, upon a subsequent visit to the platform in early September, we noted that it had been taken down. An inquiry via email confirmed: "The BFEI project has concluded and, therefore, the course and the website are no longer available."



Source: Unitar website

The reasons for the closure remain unknown, as there is no official communication regarding the termination of the BFEI on UNITAR's website. It is unclear whether it was due to the non-renewal of the commercial agreement with Danone, to ethical-legal considerations, or for some other reason.

UNICEF (2023) underscores the seriousness of corporate sponsorship by the commercial milk formula industry and its capacity to penetrate high-level governance circles. As the current example illustrates, the role of civil society organizations is therefore crucial (Lacy-Nichols et al. 2022), investigating and exposing corporate practices that seek to legitimize company involvement and position themselves as an authoritative voice in health professional training, public education, and the formulation of public health policies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LRP: Conceptualization, Data collection, Analysis, Writing first draft, Review and editing; MB: Data collection, Analysis, Supervision, Review and editing; BN: Critical review and editing; FG: Critical review and editing; IP: Critical review

and editing. All authors gave approval of the final version and consent for its publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

AI tool ChatGPT was used to translate our manuscript from Spanish to English. Translation was revised by LRP.

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