Janet Voûte is the new Nestlé vice-president responsible for its global public affairs policies and strategies. She succeeds Niels Christiansen, who has been a constant presence at United Nations meetings, other power-brokering events, and nutrition congresses, for many years. Ms Voûte is exceptionally well connected and networked. For some years she worked for the ‘international strategy consultancy’ Bain and Company, whose job is to make big businesses bigger. In 2001 she became chief executive of the World Heart Federation. In mid-2008 she joined the World Health Organization in Geneva, with special responsibility for promoting alliances with industry in particular by means of public-private initiative the UN Global Compact. Her Nestlé appointment, rumoured for some months, has now taken effect.

Janet Voûte’s move from WHO in Geneva, to now being vice-president responsible for Nestle’s global public affairs policies and strategies, based at headquarters two stations down the line from Geneva in Vevey, may indicate a pattern of ‘revolving door’ appointments. Well-qualified, senior experienced people who bring their skills to United Nations agencies and who work as high-level international civil servants in the public interest, thereby become potentially all the more valuable to leading industries, who offer them senior executive posts working in the private interest.

‘In some fields it is the rule or convention that senior executives possessed of sensitive confidential information wait a while before taking another appointment for an organisation whose interests are or may be competitive’ says Association President Barrie Margetts. It seems that the World Health Organization does not operate such a policy’.

The previous remarkable example is Derek Yach. After a distinguished career as a public health academic and activist in South Africa specialising in tobacco control,
between 2000 and 2004 he was an executive director of WHO overall responsible to the director-general for chronic disease strategy. Then after brief spells directing global health at Yale University and then the Rockefeller Foundation, as from 2007 he has been PepsiCo’s senior vice-president responsible for global health policy, and leader of its Global Human Sustainability Task Force. ‘An increasing number of senior people in the academic world, health and civil society organisations, and within the UN system, see no problem with then being employed by transnational food manufacturers? says Association Council member Carlos Monteiro. ‘One reason is that science, and the UN, are starved of resources. This is part of a continuing process of privatisation of public health’.

Last month between 14-16 October Janet Voûte participated in the Women’s Forum Global Meeting, co-sponsored by Nestlé. This was a grand occasion held in France in Deauville, described as for over a century ‘a fashionable resort for the international upper class’. A leading speaker was Nestlé chief executive officer Paul Bulcke, on the theme of ‘Change in global health: How to combat malnutrition’. He also joined in a ‘brainstorm’ on ‘How can Africa succeed in its Green Revolution?’, one of whose aspects was “What are the political obstacles, political, social, environmental, and ethical, and how can these be overcome?”

Details of the Global Meeting as posted, make no reference to baby formula, of which Nestlé is the world’s leading manufacturer. Commenting, Association Council member Urban Jonsso, former chief of nutrition at UNICEF, said: “The business of Nestlé is to make money, selling processed foods, notably infant formula, weaning products, and products for young children. It is absurd that they should now be acting as if they are in the business of saving Africa. Public health is the responsibility of the public sector, including the UN system’.

Patti Rundall of the International Baby Food Action Network says: ‘I am very disturbed, while not altogether surprised, by Janet Voûte’s move to Nestlé. This is a company that according to our global independent monitoring reports, continues to market its products in ways that undermine breastfeeding and optimal child nutrition which, as agreed and endorsed this year by WHO and UNICEF and all member states at the WHO World Health Assembly, could save the lives of 1.5 million children a year’.

She added: ‘To take just one example, Nestlé refuses to stop using promotional logos on breastmilk substitutes in more than 120 countries, claiming that its formula and baby foods “protect” babies. We look forward to Janet Voûte persuading M Bulcke to stop such deceptive tactics, as a number one public affairs priority. We hope she will also recognise that Nestlé’s aggressive push into nutrition education is yet another form of subtle marketing that creates a serious conflict of interest, and is

Anon. WHO. Transnational industry
The door revolves again. November 2010. Obtainable at www.wphna.org
http://www.wphna.org/dooorrevolves_nov2010.asp
not in line with UN policy. This calls on member states to restrict marketing, including in “settings where children gather” such as schools, and to avoid conflicts of interest. We see Nestle's attempt to use education to build public trust as a diversionary tactic that risks sustainable development, the environment and human survival. This is the world's biggest food product company, after all’.

Paul Bulcke went on from Deauville to New York, where he announced 2010 annual growth running at over 6 per cent, and a 9 month sales figure up to 30 September of 82.8 billion Swiss francs, or $US 85 billion.