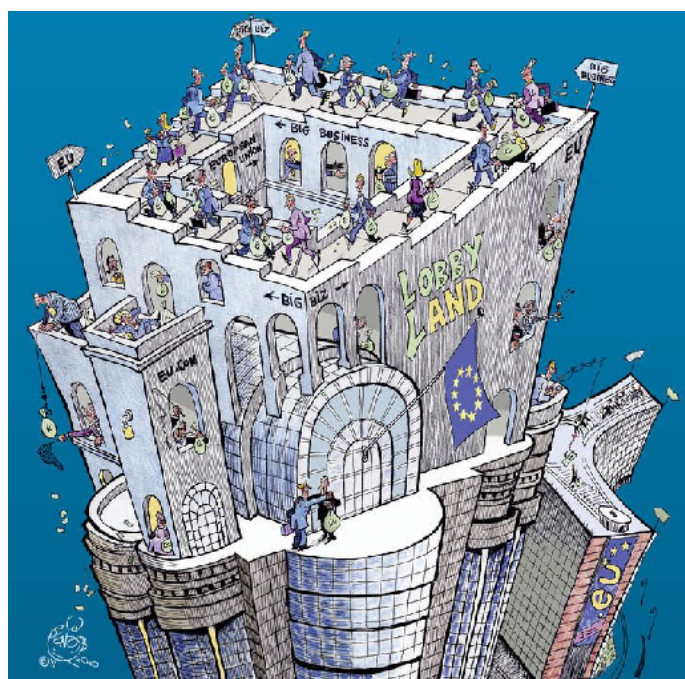


20 January 2025

## Scientific research under the influence of private interests (Season 3): the case of France

### Repeated warnings by hungerexplained regarding independence of research

In 2016, 2019, and 2023, hungerexplained expressed concerns about the influence private interests had on research.



In 2016, we cited a study by three researchers from what was then called the 'Institut National de Recherche Agronomique' (INRA)<sup>1</sup> that focused on conflicts of interest surrounding GMOs, particularly in the production of maize and cotton seeds, where these conflicts had implications on the outcomes of the research conducted [[read](#)].

In 2019, we mentioned the example of scientists being funded by the sugar lobby with the aim of influencing consumers towards consuming sugar-rich products

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<sup>1</sup> now called INRAE - Institut national de recherche pour l'agriculture, l'alimentation et l'environnement ([National research institute for agriculture, food and the environment](#)).

harmful to health, such as soft drinks. We also quoted an article published in the French newspaper 'Le Monde' stating that Coca-Cola had paid 8 million euros to scientists between 2010 and 2019 to gain their cooperation in disguising marketing operations as scientific research [[read](#)].

In 2023, in an article entitled '[Science, what science? A problem or part of the solution? When the industry doctors science for profit](#)', three examples of manipulation were presented in detail: on sugar, on pesticides, and on climate change (pp. 5 to 10).

This notwithstanding, in 2024, one could still come across researchers claiming that such actions were not proven, or that they were at least exaggerated in the particular case of France.

Yet, a report on this issue had been prepared by a panel of experts commissioned by the very official 'Commission nationale de la déontologie et des alertes en matière de santé publique et d'environnement' – [cnDaspe](#) (National Commission for Ethics and Alerts in the Area of Public Health and Environment) – at the end of 2023, in a context marked by increasingly close links between 'research and public expertise' and the 'economic world', more specifically 'for-profit private actors.'

## **cnDaspe's report on the independence of research in the area of health and the environment**

### A strong political will

According to this report, a multitude of links have been established over time between public research and private enterprises, as a result of a clear political will both at the national and the European Union levels. This trend is a consequence of the widely shared idea that the private sector is supposed to be more efficient than the public sector, and therefore should be empowered further to promote economic growth [[read](#)].

The links between private corporations and public research have been encouraged:

- at the European Union level, through 'operational mechanisms for the transfer of technology from university labs to businesses and an increase in research funding in universities by private firms' – for example, through the establishment of centres of excellence, mobility of scientists between the public and private sectors, as well as the proposal to create 'a simple and harmonised regime for intellectual property rights';
- in France, through the 'creation of research and technological innovation networks' to promote public-private partnerships, the establishment of 'innovative companies stemming from public research', and by the introduction of a research-related tax credit (Crédit impôt recherche), among others.

The authors of the report note that the strengthening of these connections has 'been accelerated since the late 1990s and has boomed after 2010' and that it is part of the 'context of decreasing structural funding for research laboratories in favour of an increase in competitive funding... often conditioned on collaborations between public research and businesses'.

### The risks

The report acknowledges that these links raise the issue of 'the autonomy of research and expertise': academic freedom (for research, teaching, and expression), independence (impartiality, transparency, plurality, and based on testable statements), especially since commercial actors now sit on the boards of public bodies such as CNRS, INRAE, Cirad, or Anses.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, by participating in its Programming Steering Committees, 'industrialists can also contribute to defining the scientific directions of research by getting involved in the programming policy of the National Research Agency (ANR), the main research funding agency in France.'

'The risks arising from financial relationships between commercial players and public scientific research actors... are manifold,' says the report. They exist at both the individual and institutional levels.

They include the possibility of the sponsor

- to impose or influence research questions, indirectly leading to the disappearance of certain research themes;
- to add in the contract between the sponsor and the research organisation conditions that contradict the principles of scientific research;
- to prohibit researchers 'from disclosing results, including those that could be of direct and urgent interest to public health or the environment';
- to impose 'non-publication clauses for inconclusive or negative results (the private actor wishing that only positive results be reported)'.

Furthermore, based on the numerous interviews they conducted, the authors observe that

- when collaboration is prolonged, scientists may end up self-censoring and 'biasing their results in order to "please" the funder' or 'adjusting scientific results according to the economic interests of the sector in question'.
- those researchers who are not associated with private partnerships may see their careers slowed down.

The identified risks can also affect the teaching provided by scientists and the results obtained in the case of public assessments in which they take part.

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<sup>2</sup> CNRS ([National Centre for Scientific Research](#)), Cirad ([French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development](#)), Anses ([French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety](#)).

The authors note that the links between the public and private sectors also result in the involvement of businesses in the development of international and European standards. Similarly, they can influence the evolution of evaluation rules and ‘good laboratory practices’, both of which have consequences on the results of research and public expertise that are, however, considered ‘independent’.

They can also contribute to the disappearance of structures that enable the creation of knowledge and lead to ‘a form of blindness that prevents them from seeing what may be problematic in [some] practices’.

Particularly concerning is the fact that they may lead to a kind of discouragement among researchers faced with their own powerlessness.

The report mentions multiple examples of the industry’s influence in diverse areas such as GMOs, bees, the determination of the carcinogenic nature of some food products, the definition of health and environmental regulations, agricultural education (especially agronomy schools), and the publication of articles in some scientific journals (in which the industry is often among the influential shareholders). Furthermore, some researchers may be invited to participate in activities carried out by foundations or institutes funded by corporations that are known for their lobbying work.

#### Existing protection measures

The authors analyse the rules in place in various public institutions aimed at addressing these risks and ‘preventing situations that could harm the independence and impartiality of [their] activities’.

They found them to be partial, diverse, scattered, and not always very effective, and mainly focused on financial matters.

The standards in use appeared to them easily avoidable – particularly in the area of multiple jobs – or insufficient regarding conflicts of interest. Control has its limitations and sanctions are not well defined.

#### Recommendations made by the report

The recommendations presented at the conclusion of the report suggest, among other things:

- increasing public funding,
- limiting private funding and using a part of it (or a portion of the turnover of private companies) to finance research activities conducted independently of industrial interests;
- improving the information and training of researchers to better equip them to face the risks identified;
- strengthening the governance of research institutions; and,

- implementing measures to ensure quality, reliability, and diversity of expertise by improving risk assessment, transparency, and the public expertise process.

## Conclusion

The report by the cnDAspe confirms that in France, as elsewhere, **the increasingly close relationships between the private sector and public research bodies generate risks for both individual researchers and public research in general**. The independence and relevance of the research undertaken (or abandoned) and the use, dissemination – or conversely – the monopolisation of results by private interests are part of this.

These risks have become effective and more important as the links between public research and commercial enterprises multiplied. These relationships are booming and facilitated by a range of measures driven by a clear political will both at European Union and national level. They threaten the independence of research and influence the direction taken by the production of knowledge.

Several examples, some of which have made headlines, have cast doubt on the credibility of science in the public eye and led to a loss of trust in scientists. This is a reality whose consequences have yet to be fully assessed.

It is therefore crucial, as recommended in the cnDAspe report, to **strengthen the protection of research in order to preserve its quality, relevance, and independence**.

This is particularly important in a world where technoscience is presented as an essential – if not the only – ingredient in addressing the intertwined crises that humanity must face (climate, water, biodiversity, land, economic inequalities, health) [[read](#)].

While the cnDAspe report is a sign that authorities are aware of the issue, **it is not certain that, in the current political context – both international and national –, appropriate measures to protect research will actually be taken in the immediate**.

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to know more:

- Desquilbet, M. et al., [Indépendance de la recherche et de l'expertise dans les contextes de relations public-privé intéressant les domaines de la santé et de l'environnement](#), Commission nationale de la déontologie et des alertes en matière de santé publique et d'environnement (cnDAspe), 2023 (in French).

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained](#) related to the topic:

- [Fixing the food system through innovation, the World Economic Forum's recipe](#), 2025.
- [In the heart of the global economic system: the protection of intellectual property rights](#), 2024.
- [Science, what science ? A problem or part of the solution? When the industry doctors science for profit](#), 2023.
- [Scientific research under the influence of private interests \(Season 2\) : sugar and physical exercise](#), 2019.
- [Food, Environment and Health](#), 2017.
- [Scientific research under the influence of private interests](#), 2016.