

The importance of breastfeeding in reducing child mortality

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“Exclusive breastfeeding is one of the most powerful tools we have to combat child hunger and death.” Ann Veneman, Executive Director, UNICEF, November 2005

UNICEF estimates that two million infants die each year from not being adequately breastfed¹. The lack of clean water in many developing countries means that bottle-fed babies are 15 times more likely to die from diarrhoea than their breast-fed counter-parts. Financial hardship in developing countries can lead a mother to over-dilute formula to make it last longer. Extra food for the mother to be able to breastfeed can cost as little as 10% of the cost of artificial baby food.

Increasing breastfeeding rates in the developing world is a key intervention to reach Millennium Development Goal 4 (MDG 4) to reduce the mortality rate among children under five by two thirds by 2015. The World Health Organisation recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, the introduction of local, nutrient rich complementary foods thereafter with continued breastfeeding to two years of age and beyond.² UNICEF has estimated that since 1990, six million lives a year have been saved by exclusive breastfeeding and global breastfeeding rates have risen by at least 15%.

Breastfeeding improves immunity to life-threatening illnesses³ making it a low cost preventative measure to tackling child mortality. According to Save the Children, breastfeeding is one of the five proven low cost solutions to infant mortality along with skilled care at childbirth, measles immunization, oral rehydration therapy for diarrhea and medical care for pneumonia.⁴

The unethical marketing practises of baby food companies continue to compromise breastfeeding rates in developing countries. The 1981 UN World Health Organisation *“International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes”*(WHO Code) outlines restrictions on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes. Subsequent World Health Assembly

¹ Jones, G., et al. And the Bellagio Child Survival Study Group, ‘How many child deaths can we prevent this year?’, *the Lancet*, 2003; 362: pp. 65-71; and UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, ‘1990-2005. Celebrating the Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding’, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, November 2005.

² World Health Assembly Resolution 54.2, 2001.

³<http://www.savethechildren.org/publications/mothers/2007/SOWM-2007-final.pdf>

⁴<http://www.savethechildren.org/publications/mothers/2007/SOWM-2007-final.pdf>, p.4.

(WHA) Resolutions have sought to strengthen the WHO Code in response to attempts by companies to get around provisions in the WHO Code.

Reports of violations of the WHO Code and WHA Resolutions continue to be reported by Baby Milk Action and International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). For example, health professionals are given 'gifts' in return for getting mothers to feed their babies the company's products.⁵ Undersecretary of the Philippines Ministry of Health, Alex Padilla, was reported in the media as saying that new mothers have often been given infant formula by doctors and midwives in the hospitals, on commission from the milk formula companies.⁶ The WHO Code requires under Article 7.3 that *"No financial or material inducements to promote products within the scope of this Code should be offered by manufacturers or distributors to health workers or members of their families, nor should these be accepted by health workers or members of their families."* An estimated 16,000 babies lives are lost each year in the Philippines because they are not adequately breastfed. Infant formula sales in the Philippines are over \$1 billion a year.⁷

The only way to ensure that breastmilk substitutes are marketed ethically is for all Governments to implement the WHO Code and WHA Resolutions into legislation with appropriate mechanisms to ensure compliance with the legislation. In the absence of appropriate legislation, the companies should agree to allow for independent and transparent monitoring of their marketing practices.

What you can do

1. Get informed: Watch a UNICEF-produced short 5 part video online, exposing unethical marketing of breastmilk substitutes in the Philippines. Part 1 of 5 can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNYDPKQOVUE>
2. Get involved: Go to the International Baby Food Action Network and Baby Milk Action sites for up-to-date information on code violations, political action and consumer boycotts: www.ibfan.org www.babymilkaction.org

⁵ See for example Yeong Joo Kean and Annelies Allain, 'Breaking the Rules, Stretching the Rules 2004', International Baby Food Action Network, May 2004.

⁶ Connie Levett, 'Baby formula battle goes to Manila court', *The Age*, 3 February 2007, p. 20.

⁷ World Health Organisation, Philippines.