

MOST COUNTRIES YET TO “GO GREEN” ON INFANT FEEDING

42 MILLION INFANTS OUT OF 78 MILLION BORN ARE SUB-OPTIMALLY FED

The newly released report, “The State of Breastfeeding in 33 Countries: 2010, Tracking Infant and Young Child Feeding Policies and Programmes Worldwide” <http://www.worldbreastfeedingtrends.org/WBTi-report.php> shows how babies are missing out on their foundation of development and basic protection from disease. Millions of newborn babies are still not receiving timely breastfeeding within one hour or exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and timely and appropriate complementary feeding after six months along with continued breastfeeding, a period that is so critical for survival and brain development.

Simply speaking, national groups in 33 countries have conducted assessment of their policy and programmes on breastfeeding and infant and young child feeding, using the World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative (WBTi)ⁱ tool kit, and the programme has rated these countries RED, YELLOW, BLUE or GREEN – according to their performance. Although 33 have completed this assessment, so far no country has yet achieved a GREEN rating- and only 9 received a BLUE rating, the next level of performance. So there is clearly a long way to go. The unnecessary artificial feeding that results, not only risks child health, but also pollutes the environment. Breastmilk is the world’s most local and environmentally friendly food for first two years requiring no polluting packaging or manufacturing or transport.

The WBTi report clearly shows that policies and programmes are lagging behind in all the 10 areas of action highlighted in the W.H.O. 's *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*, especially in relation to support to women when they need it most.ⁱⁱ

According to the UN Secretary General’s recently launched *Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health*, in 2015 alone, 21.9 million more infants would be exclusively breastfed for first six monthsⁱⁱⁱ. Most countries have not been able to raise their exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months rates because of weak or un-coordinated action on three of the most important interventions – having a national plan of action with a budget, good health care support facilities, and adequate maternity protection.

Says Dr Arun Gupta, a senior pediatrician based in New Delhi and the creator of this initiative, member of the Prime Ministers Council on India ‘s Nutrition Challenges, who works as the regional coordinator of International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) Asia. “What does this mean? If you look at the new booming economy block BRIC; Brazil, India, China, while policy makers focus on the expansion of the economy through market growth, in this report mothers, children and child health are the losers. Over 78 million births take place in these 33 WBTi countries - more than half of the babies born world over – yet only about 36 million are exclusively breastfed for the first six months. That shows it all. Much more needs to be done to support women with maternity protection to enable them to combine breastfeeding with returning to work.”

According to WHO and UNICEF, 1.5 million children die because of not breastfeeding, and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months provides a major protection from disease like diarrhea and newborn infections in the developing countries.

“If the UN Secretary General's strategy is to be effective and succeed in its stated goals, we need to act to put seriously and earnestly in place all UN policies and programmes to protect, promote and support breastfeeding universally” says Professor Anwar Fazal,

Director of the Right Livelihood College , and Chairperson Emeritus of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action(WABA).

Information on what the gaps are and what needs to be done is available in this report. Many of these countries also have high neonatal and infant mortality. Steps to enhance breastfeeding rates will go a long way in protection from disease, as well as brain development. A large part, 70% of which happens during first year of life.

Having a national policy and plan of action means nothing without a budget, the first step towards providing support to women; only a few countries have it. Lack of funding for actions on breastfeeding, and infant and young child feeding emerges as a major gap. According to the Report only two countries have achieved a reasonable score on maternity protection, an area, which is critical, if women have to optimally feed their infants. Two major factors that emerge and are the constraints: lack of understanding and lack of financial resources.

According to Patti Rundall, OBE, Policy Director of Baby Milk Action, a UK based civil society group “Many governments are now taking steps to support breastfeeding. But unless action is taken to stop the misleading commercial promotion of baby feeding products – especially the health and nutrition claims, all these efforts are undermined. Women need consistent truly independent, evidence -based information and support WHEN they need it – if they don’t get this its simply not fair to blame them when things go wrong ”

Piecemeal approaches do not work, according to a 2010 report from UNICEF^{iv} that comprehensively assessed programmes in six countries. Key findings reveal that there are major gaps in almost all programmes in 33 countries but for only a few, highlighting the need for a comprehensive action.

Countries should take action now, or millions of newborns will miss their very basic human right - optimal food and protection from disease. What can be done is captured in the ‘International Obligations for Infants’ Right to Food’^v.

Contacts Dr Arun Gupta : arun.ibfan@gmail.com, Radha : radhab@yahoo.com, Dr JP Dadhich : jpdadhich@gmail.com

NOTES for Editors

ⁱ <http://www.worldbreastfeedingtrends.org/key.php> Accessed 7 Nov, 2010

ⁱⁱ http://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/gs_infant_feeding_text_eng.pdf Accessed Nov 7, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.un.org/sg/hf/Global_StrategyEN.pdf Accessed 7 Nov, 2010

^{iv} http://www.unicef.org/spanish/nutrition/files/IYCF_Booklet_April_2010_Web.pdf Accessed 7 Nov, 2010.

^v <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kent/050%20Gupta%20INFANTS.doc> in http://www.policyinnovations.org/innovators/people/data/george_kent/res/id=sa_File1/GORFflyer.pdf