

Breastfeeding & Food Security

Rome Declaration on World Food Security, World Food Summit (Rome, 13 November 1996)

Plan of Action

Commitment 1: 17. Objective 1.4:

(d) Give special attention to promoting and protecting the interests and needs of the child, particularly the girl child, in food security programmes, consistent with the World Summit for Children - Convention on the Rights of the Child, New York 1990.

Food security means having enough food to maintain a healthy and productive life today and in the future. Communities enjoy food security when all individuals in all households have access to food adequate in quantity and quality, affordable, acceptable, appropriate and readily available from local sources on a continuing basis.

Breastfeeding has an important role to play in making food security a reality for over 20 million babies born every year. It provides total food security for infants. There is no other readily available, affordable and nutritious food source than breastmilk. **It is a complete and natural food for infants for first six months of age.** Exclusive breastfeeding is all that a baby needs for first six months and complementary foods are added thereafter. Breastfeeding, along with other foods, continues to provide the growing child with essential nutrients and energy, it helps to prevent malnutrition in the second year of life and beyond. Breastmilk is the first food for babies, but breastfeeding also benefits women, families and communities. Breastfeeding helps control births, fertility, reduces post-partum bleeding and thus anemia in women, and reduces infant morbidity and mortality. Since breastfed babies have higher IQs, all communities benefit. Healthier mothers and children means lower health care costs for the community.

What would happen if breastfeeding was to go up or down

Let us look if breastmilk production was to go up or down. A reduction in 10% breastmilk would demand an additional 400 million L of milk, which would cost Rs. 680 Crores. On the other hand an increase in breastmilk by 10%, 400 million L of breastmilk would be available extra each year to add on to the food balance sheet. This is worth Rs. 680 Crores, and will be available for child nutrition & development with an extra advantage of increased neonatal and child survival, decreased infant and young child diseases and reduction in maternal anemia.

Breastfeeding helps solve hunger problems

Breastfeeding empowers women. Mothers can feel reassured that they are providing the best for their children. They feel secure in the knowledge that they are providing the best that food mothers and nature have to offer to babies.

Breastfeeding helps in solving the problem of hunger. In most communities, there are households and individuals who do not have enough to eat and experience hunger on a regular basis. Breastfeeding is an important insurance when families face food shortages in an emergency. Babies in poor households

receive breastmilk; they are thus eating the most affordable, nutritious and accessible food in town!

Moreover, if food assistance is provided to help feed hungry families and we have to distribute occasional free tins of infant formula, that helps perpetuate poverty and infant malnutrition. Mothers receive one tin; lose confidence in themselves, and their own milk supply. As mothers tend to supplement with other infant formulae, breastmilk production may decline.

Breastmilk - a valuable national and natural resource

Breastmilk is a natural resource of tremendous value. Experience in some countries has shown that investing in promotion of breastfeeding is among the most cost-effective health interventions for child survival. Investments are small and returns are invaluable for the child, mother, family and the nation.

Breastfeeding is priceless. Advocacy of exclusive breastfeeding requires an appreciation of its importance by society. Economic measurements cannot put a value on any expression of love or altruism. Most women view breastfeeding with pride. However, placing human milk on food balance sheets would increase its perceived value. While the value of manufactured baby foods is included in the calculation of the Gross National Product (GNP), the value of breastmilk is not. The real size of this contribution in terms of the food supply to a nation is impressive and demonstrates to policy makers the importance breastfeeding in measurable terms.

According to calculations based on some realistic and reasonable assumptions, it has been estimated that in India, women can produce about 6800 million L of breastmilk. Actual production of breastmilk has been estimated to be about 4000 million L¹. Realistic production of breastmilk does not happen due to certain faulty feeding practices prevalent in the communities and false beliefs such as women's perceived risk of not having enough milk for their babies.

Valued in 1998 at the cost of fresh animal milk (Rs. 15 per liter), market value of realistic production of breastmilk was estimated to be Rs. 5916 Crores. If it were to be replaced by tinned milk at a cost of Rs. 30 per liter at that time, the would double to Rs. 11832 crore.

In 2001, with animal milk priced at Rs. 17/L (April 2001- Mother Dairy Milk) the cost of 4000 million L breastmilk is estimated to be Rs. 68000 million (6800 Crores) and if priced at tinned milk (Rs 37 /L) it is estimated to be Rs.148000 million. (14800 Crores).

At the family level, breastfeeding is of great value in terms of cash, as families have to spend on bottles, milk, fuel and many other things. The cost of artificial feeding a 3-month-old baby worked out to be Rs 1100 per month (1998), which could be saved to buy food for the family.

1 Economic value of breastfeeding in India, The National Medical Journal of India, Vol. 12:3, May-June, 1999.

Continued breastfeeding, even after the first 6 month, alongwith complementary foods:

After six months of age most babies need foods to complement breastmilk. Babies and growing children don't need expensive processed baby foods. A combination of breastfeeding and family food

can provide all the nutrients that children need. This will also be affordable.

Two years and beyond ...

The benefits of breastmilk continue after the addition of family foods. Breastmilk is a source of complete protein that complements cereals and other foods.

Micronutritional benefits of breastfeeding give children hope for a healthy future

Breastfeeding plays a major role in correcting life-threatening deficiencies.

Iron Deficiencies

According to the NFHS-22, the most common nutritional problem in India is anemia, which is mostly iron deficiency and it affects more than half of women of reproductive age, and 70% infants and young children. Anemia results in premature delivery of babies, low birth weight and low iron reserves resulting in sick mothers and sick babies. Although human milk has only a small amount (0.5-1mg/L) of iron, breastfed babies are rarely iron deficient because the iron in breastmilk is the best absorbed out of all forms of iron. The iron in any other milks/tinned infant formula is not so well absorbed by babies. Early introduction and composition of complementary foods impairs the efficiency of iron absorption from breastmilk. Even anemic mothers produce breastmilk, which provides sufficient iron for their babies. However iron may need to be given to breastfed children after a certain age.

Vitamin A

Breastmilk is the best source of vitamin A for infants. Vitamin A deficiencies affect millions of children in India. Consequences of vitamin A deficiency include increasing seriousness of infections and associated deaths, growth retardation, iron-deficiency anemia and night blindness. Without breastmilk, newborns cannot maintain optimal vitamin A nutrition past a few weeks. Vitamin A deficiency is rare among breastfed infants. Even a malnourished mother's breastmilk protects against vitamin A deficiency for the first six months of exclusive breastfeeding. However, vitamin A levels in breastmilk are influenced by mother's diet and nutritional status.

2 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2), MOHFW, Govt. of India, 1998-1999.

Food security matters throughout women's lives

Pre-conception or pre-pregnancy

Young women need to be healthy and well-nourished before they begin their reproductive life. Deficiencies in energy, fatty acids and micronutrients may result in low birth weight babies.

Pregnancy

Good nutrition throughout pregnancy leads to healthier babies. Low birth-weight babies face many disadvantages including increased risk of infection and death in the early weeks of life and increased incidence of diseases such as diabetes, stroke and heart disease later in life. Maternal malnutrition is the most common cause of low birth-weight babies. Pregnant women are at risk for nutritional deficiencies, particularly in low-income households.

Meeting the needs of breastfeeding mothers

Breastfeeding mothers need a supportive environment, including having their health and nutritional needs met. They need to increase their caloric intake and take care of themselves when they are the source of food and care for their children. Human lactation is remarkably resistant to acute caloric insufficiency and appears only to be compromised by severe or long-term starvation. However, when the maternal diet is inadequate, the mother's own nutritional status will suffer. There is, therefore, a reason to pay special attention to the maternal diet.

Securing a Healthy Future, in the 10th Plan

Breastfeeding has been talked about in relation to child health, nutrition and in relation to child spacing - as a means of family planning.

The preparation of the 10th Five Year Plan for the country is a good opportunity to remind us that breastmilk is first and foremost food, a sufficient food for the first six months of age, and contributes to food security in 6-24 months age group; efforts should thus be made to protect and increase this natural resource. Studies have confirmed that this increase is possible.

Breastfeeding is at the heart of food security, economic progress, utilization of natural resources, sustainable development strategy, social welfare, the environment, and the future of people.

Suggestions for action

1. **Promote exclusive breastfeeding during first six months and appropriate complementary feeding thereafter as a strategy to improve neonatal and infant survival and development.**
2. **romote exclusive breastfeeding for babies 0-6 months as part of a country's food security plan.**
3. **Include breastmilk in the calculations of a country's food supply and its Food Balance Sheet.**

Breastmilk is the only food for millions of babies. In India, over 4000 million Litre of breastmilk are consumed annually - in the past this important food source had been ignored in the calculation of a nation's food supply. Breastfeeding is an important part of country's food security. We need to protect this resource and make an attempt to increase its availability.

The Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) is a registered, non-profit, independent national organization with international collaboration and works towards protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding (especially exclusive breastfeeding for 0-6 months) and appropriate complementary feeding of infants & young children. BPNI is a network of individuals and organizations and is the Regional Focal Point for South Asia for the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) & Regional Coordinating Center for International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) South Asia. BPNI is registered under Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and is notified NGO by the Government of India. BPNI does not accept funds or sponsorship of any kind from the companies producing infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles, related equipments, or infant foods (cereal foods).

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