



BPNI BULLETIN

Number 21 & 22, March 2003

From the Desk of the National Coordinator

Breastfeeding contributes to poverty reduction

The importance of breastfeeding in human life cannot be understated. This basic act, that nurtures life, is an important bond between the mother and the new born baby. The warm contact provides the new born with not only sustenance but also love and security. Breastfeeding provides protection from diseases and malnutrition, gives infants a head start in life and also saves money which artificial or bottle feeding entails.

Bottle feeding on the other hand perpetuates poverty. BPNI in 1998 calculated that the estimated cost of bottle feeding a baby was Rs 1,100 per month. To an average Indian family, artificial feeding may mean spending half to one third of their income. Poor families spending money on artificial feeding from their tight budgets may have to actually reduce expenditure on nutrition of other family members, especially girls. The whole family falls into the downward spiral of malnutrition, greater incidence of disease, increased medical expenditure and decreased finances. The other ramification is that the baby being brought up on expensive artificial bottle feed has increased chances of succumbing to infections, entailing even greater spending on health care and treatment for the sick child. All this perpetuates poverty.

Infant and young child feeding is very aptly put in the framework of poverty reduction strategies. As the Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2002 states:

"Inappropriate feeding practices and their consequences are major obstacles to sustainable socio-economic development and poverty reduction. Governments will be unsuccessful in the efforts to accelerate economic development in any significant long-term sense until optimal child growth and development, especially through appropriate feeding practices, are ensured"

Poverty is the result of complex processes and various factors, which have many reasons and aspects, including political, economical, social, cultural, human development, security and vulnerability.

Social mobilisation of citizens to acquire countervailing power by enhancing their rights, is necessary for poverty reduction. Influencing policy development, designed to change local, national and international processes and structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality, greatly contributes to poverty alleviation.

It is here that protecting, promoting and supporting optimal infant and young child feeding practices including exclusive breastfeeding for first six months and continued breastfeeding for two years or beyond with initiation of timely and appropriate complementary feeding, fits in very well with poverty reduction measures.

Breastfeeding has a direct relation to the nutrition levels of the infants. It has been reported that breastfed infants have higher IQ, better nutrition levels and are emotionally sound. Breastfeeding also empowers women while contributing to the financial security of families. Investments in promoting optimal infant and young child feeding are therefore important and essential for ensuring a healthy and well developed society.

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