



Newsletter

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From the desk of Regional Coordinator

Governments in the Asia Pacific, Get set, On your marks, And Go!

On 18th May 2002, the 55th World Health Assembly adopted a Resolution on Infant and Young Child Nutrition ([WHA 55.25](#)) and the Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Geneva. This resolution reiterated the WHA resolution 54.2 of May 2001 that defined period of optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding to be first six months. The strategy was unanimously endorsed by all member States of WHO in May 2002 and the UNICEF Executive Board in September 2002 bringing a unique global consensus.

The strategy defines 'Optimal infant and young child feeding' as *exclusive breastfeeding for first six months and continued breastfeeding for two years or beyond along with adequate and appropriate complementary feeding started after six months*. Since then, many countries the world over, have adopted this policy. The strategy is a guide for country specific approaches to improve infant and young child feeding practices to reduce the burden of malnutrition and strongly reaffirms the *Innocenti Declaration*, the *International Code for Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes* (The Code) and the *Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative* (BFHI).

We know that malnutrition in the Asia Pacific region is the highest in the world; in the interest of our people, urgent attention by the governments and the civil society is warranted. The strategy states that member Governments should carry out the primary obligation to formulate, implement, monitor and evaluate national policy and plan of action on infant and young child feeding. Not to end here, it also asks for committing adequate resources.

According to the strategy, all concerned parties like health professional bodies, employees, educational authorities, international organizations, the mass media, NGOs including community based support groups have to play a positive contribution to this. The strategy spells out the role of international organizations; they should facilitate the work of national governments to ensure "that the international code and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions are respected in trade policies and negotiations" and not to allow WTO agreements to prevail over the WHO recommendations.

At the same time, the strategy recognizes the role to be played by the baby food manufacturers. Para 44 in the strategy clearly defines the role of commercial sector. They have two obligations; firstly, the foods they produce should meet international quality standards and secondly, they should fully conform to the Code and the subsequent relevant WHA resolutions. Delegate of the Government of India made a statement while participating in the debate "Commercial enterprises by definition are profit driven entities. It is neither appropriate nor realistic for the WHO to expect that commercial groups will work along with governments and other groups to protect, promote and support breastfeeding." Similarly, the delegate from Palau appealed to W.H.O. to "protect Member States from undue and unwanted influence by industries and manipulation by them". It is in this sense that action taken by the governments and others concerned should keep the business involvement clearly limited to two areas mentioned above.

While a favorable environment has been created globally, it is an opportunity for the member governments to show their commitments to act NOW. I know it will not be easy to mobilize both human and financial resources for this type of action. What may be easy is to re-look at the allocation of the currently applied and planned child survival strategies in view of the current scientific evidence that out of all preventive interventions identified, breastfeeding (*exclusive for first six months and continued for 6-11 months*)¹ can prevent 13% under five deaths, which places it on top of the table. This is possible only if exclusive breastfeeding for first six months is universal. Several studies have shown this to be feasible.

IBFAN is with you to assist in what ever manner to protect the interests of mothers and children from the vested interests.

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¹ Jones et al. Lancet 362, July 5, 2003. How many child deaths can we prevent this year?