

### The group behind the news

Founded in 1979, the [International Baby Food Action Network \(IBFAN\)](#) is a world-wide network of grass-roots groups working to protect, promote and support breastfeeding against commercial influences. IBFAN advocates for strong national legislation. The South Asia sub-regional branch of the IBFAN is based in Delhi, India.

## Anatomy of a successful campaign

*An Indian advocacy group's detailed and extensive campaign against the repeal of a piece of legislation in India produced a positive outcome within only three months.*

### Background to the campaign

When an element within the Indian government proposed repealing the country's 1992 Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act (popularly called the IMS Act), the result might have been a weakening of a national ban on the commercial promotion of products that compete with breastfeeding. Dr Arun Gupta, Regional Coordinator of the International Baby Food Action Network's (IBFAN) 44 Asian-Pacific countries, organised a campaign—'Save the IMS Act'—to fight the suggested repeal. So successful were these efforts that the subject of a repeal of the IMS Act was dismissed by the Indian government three months later.

### The campaign strategy is outlined

The first step in the 'Save the IMS Act' campaign occurred in January 2005, when the other group for which Dr Gupta worked, the [Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India \(BPNI\)](#), sketched out a comprehensive strategy to gather support. The BPNI planned to approach the public, the media, political parties, government departments, key individuals, citizens' rights groups, professional bodies, economists, and NGOs working on public health, women's and children's issues.

### A first step—gain the backing of other groups

Detailed attempts to muster support began when Dr Gupta and colleagues approached partner groups in India. Organisations that pledged help included:

- [Association for Consumers' Action on Safety and Health \(ACASH\)](#).
- [India Alliance for Child Rights \(IACR\)](#).
- [Jan Swasthya Abhiyan \(JSA\)](#)—the Indian branch of the [People's Health Movement](#).
- [Voluntary Health Association of India \(VHAI\)](#).

The campaigners contacted Dr Vina Majumdar of the Center for Women Development Studies (CWDS). Her personal involvement and guidance was crucial in getting several other organisations to back the campaign.

Dr Gupta also alerted the global community working on breastfeeding—including the other regional branches of the IBFAN, which offered full backing, and the Malaysia-based [World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action \(WABA\)](#).

### Campaigners turn to government departments and official bodies

The campaign moved onto government departments. The subject of the repeal was discussed with the Department of Women and Child Development (the sponsoring Ministry for the original IMS Act). The Department's Secretary wrote a strong letter to the government advising against repeal of the IMS Act. Dr Gupta's group then

met the Minister of Human Resource Development, and briefed him. The Minister, too, wrote to the government, arguing against repeal of the IMS Act. The campaigners also pressed the government department responsible for initiating the planned repeal. The department promised to look into the matter.

Unsatisfied by this response, Dr Gupta appraised Dr Syeda Hameed, a member of the Health Planning Commission of India, and told her of developments within the campaign. She readily agreed to assist. The BPNI communicated with the National Commission for Women and the National Advisory Council as well. Both assured their cooperation.

UNICEF expressed an interest in generating assistance, and wrote on the campaign's behalf to the Minister of Human Resource Development. Dr Gupta made representations to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which immediately took up the case and asked the Minister of Food Processing not to repeal the IMS Act. After receiving a lukewarm response from the government, the NHRC issued a press release to raise the profile of the issue nationally.

### **Working with the media**

On the media front, the BPNI briefed Rahul Dev, a senior journalist with a keen interest in social issues. He was able to furnish the cause with much-needed assistance through his media and political links. The media, in fact, provided unprecedented encouragement, and carried several stories that helped the campaign's issues reach a wider public.

### **Political encouragement**

Opposition political parties (and even politicians in the ruling party) guaranteed to back the campaign right up to Parliamentary level, where the Bill overturning the IMS Act was due to be introduced.

### **Meetings and a petition**

After the campaign had been running for about a month, a meeting entitled 'Coming together to save the IMS Act' was jointly called in February 2005 by the BPNI, the JSA, the IACR, and the VHAI. The meeting was addressed by Dr Hameed of the Health Planning Commission. She expressed her concern about the proposed repeal of the legislation. Meanwhile, a petition organised by the campaigners, entitled 'Save the IMS Act', had been signed by 25 organisations. The petition was sent to the Prime Minister, the President and the government ministers involved in repealing the IMS Act.

### **A final push**

Finally, leading members of the campaign met Sharad Pawar, Minister of Agriculture, who headed the group of eight Ministers overseeing the process of repealing the IMS Act. He listened to the campaigners' arguments and sought some clarifications. After assuring his audience that he understood the issue, he told the campaigners that the IMS Act would not, after all, be repealed.

On April 6th 2005, the campaigners read in the press the happy news that the government had responded positively to the controversy and decided not to repeal the IMS Act. It was, wrote Dr Gupta in a press release of the same date, "a turning point in the history of the breastfeeding movement in India".

<http://www.ibfan-asiapacific.org>