

## UNBAT Statement to the NGO Committee on UNICEF, Feb.12, 2009

The UN Breastfeeding Advocacy Team (UNBAT) members are NGOs that take action to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding at the grassroots, professional, and policy level. The key documents promoted and used for advocacy include the Innocenti Declarations (1990 & 2005), Convention on the Rights of the Child, the WHO/UNICEF Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding, and the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes. UNBAT's mission is to optimize the rights of mothers to breastfeed and the rights of infants to consume human milk, preferably from the breast. As members, we value the opportunity to raise the profile of breastfeeding through outreach to other NGOs at the United Nations. Almost every person on the planet is affected by how they were fed in their early years.

### Breastfeeding is not a footnote to development – it is central!

Why? Lack of breastfeeding hinders many aspects of development, making interventions more challenging or less effective than they might be. Most of the Millennium Development Goals will be difficult or impossible to attain without optimal breastfeeding, particularly Goals 1, 4, and 5. Many interventions also influence breastfeeding, sometimes with unintentionally negative consequences.

### Isn't breastfeeding just a natural process?

While many people intellectually accept that breastfeeding is best, they sometimes assume breastfeeding is an activity mothers come by “naturally” or “instinctually”. Yet the reality is that breastfeeding is not instinctual for mothers; it is learned. Over the last several generations many women have been overtly and covertly discouraged from breastfeeding. Learning opportunities are lost when young children are no longer observing normal infant feeding as they grow up and when new mothers can no longer seek advice and support from female relatives that have had a normal breastfeeding experience.

### Is the disruption of breastfeeding really that important?

In an analysis of child survival strategies, *breastfeeding was ranked at the top of the list of preventive interventions. If 90% of infants younger than six months old were exclusively breastfed, an estimated 13% of the deaths among children under five would be prevented.*[1] No other preventive intervention even comes close. This evidence-based estimate highlights the fact that prematurely introducing substances other than human milk to infants increases childhood deaths dramatically. Beyond death, there is also strong evidence of an increase in infectious and chronic diseases among infants and their mothers, placing a burden on already overstretched health care systems.

### How massive is the global disruption of breastfeeding?

Exclusive breastfeeding is the normal healthy mode of feeding infants younger than six months. From 2000-2006, more than *three out of five infants* were prematurely fed something other than human milk, even in developing countries.[2] In 2005 in West and Central Africa, over one in ten infants died before their first birthday,[2,3] and almost *four out of five infants* were prematurely fed something other than human milk.[2] Normal infant feeding has been disrupted on a global scale.

### Is breastfeeding relevant to global development?

In the “serious” business of global development, people tend to focus more on transferring products, services, and technology than on preserving natural processes. Breastfeeding should not be relegated to the sidelines simply because it is assumed that it is a natural process. Preserving breastfeeding deserves our best efforts.

If the world underwent a natural or manmade disaster that disrupted the normal sources of food for three out of five of the people on earth, wouldn't we consider it a global emergency? Particularly, if the substitutes for those foods increased the risk of death and disease among infants and their mothers? Wouldn't everyone look for a more sustainable solution, knowing that those substitutes led to dramatic increases in use of water, energy, and fossil fuels during processing, distribution, and preparation? The members of UNBAT ask all NGOs, regardless of your primary mission, to *first, do no harm* to breastfeeding. Then, seek opportunities to incorporate complementary actions that preserve breastfeeding into your ongoing programs.

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[1] Jones, et al. How many child deaths can we prevent this year? *The Lancet*. 2003; 362:65-71.

[2] UNICEF, Statistical Tables. *State of the World's Children*. 2009.

[3] West and Central Africa have the highest infant mortality rates in the world.

## **Addendum: Contributions of Individual Members of UNBAT**

**La Leche League International (LLLI)**, founded in 1956, is an international organization whose mission is to help mothers worldwide to breastfeed through mother-to-mother support, encouragement, information, and education, and to promote a better understanding of breastfeeding as an important element in the healthy development of the baby and mother. The LLLI mission is carried out by thousands of accredited volunteer Leaders (those that have gone through a formal accreditation process and have breastfed their own children) that promote and support optimal breastfeeding practices in local communities in more than 68 countries. LLLI is in an official relationship and works with WHO, WABA, and UNICEF and is a member of the CORE Group and UNBAT.

For more information, go to: <http://www.llli.org>

**The International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA)** is the professional association for International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) and other health care professionals who care for breastfeeding families. Our vision is a worldwide network of lactation professionals. Its mission is to advance the profession of lactation consulting worldwide through leadership, advocacy, professional development, and research. ILCA provides official representation to international organizations including the UNBAT, the World Health Assembly, Codex Alimentarius, and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

For more information, go to: <http://www.ilca.org>

**The Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine (ABM)** is an international organization of physicians dedicated to the promotion, protection, and support of breastfeeding and human lactation. It is an independent self-sustaining multi-specialty organization that promotes breastfeeding education, knowledge, attitudes, and skills for physicians worldwide. ABM's mission is to unite members of the various medical specialties into one association with this common purpose, with goals including the development and dissemination of standards for physician education on breastfeeding and human lactation, and to serve and be recognized as the premier international authority on breastfeeding medicine.

For more information, go to: <http://www.bfmed.org>

**The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA)** works to protect, promote and support breastfeeding worldwide in the framework of the Innocenti Declarations (1990 and 2005) and the Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding. WABA's goal is to create an enabling environment for mothers, thus contributing to increasing optimal breastfeeding and infant and young child feeding practices. We are a global network of organizations and individuals that work at international, regional, national and community levels by *networking and facilitating collaborative efforts* in social mobilization, advocacy, information dissemination and capacity building.

For more information go to: <http://www.waba.org.my/> [waba@streamyx.com](mailto:waba@streamyx.com)