

## WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK 2012

As the world celebrates the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World Breastfeeding Week, 1-7 August, 2012, UNICEF is proud to support the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA), and join the World Health Organisation and NGO partners to highlight the critical role of breastfeeding in child survival, growth and development.

Despite compelling evidence on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and sustained efforts to encourage it, progress is patchy. Global rates of exclusive breastfeeding for infants under six months of age crept from 32 per cent to 39 per cent between 1995 and 2010. In most of the ten countries where two thirds of children are not exclusively breastfed, rates have barely improved.

There is some good news. Data from 90 developing countries shows that in over half, exclusive breastfeeding is increasing -- despite the fact that many of these nations face significant development challenges and emergencies. This success is due to a combination of strong government leadership, comprehensive programmes, community engagement, and broad partnerships.

To build on this success and achieve results for infants and young children, especially the hardest to reach, we must better monitor our progress. This echoes the theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week: understanding the past, planning for the future. Recently, UNICEF assessed the scope and scale of programmes for both breastfeeding and complementary feeding in 65 countries. The absence of effective monitoring systems meant that most countries were unable to report on the scale and coverage of their Infant and Young Child Feeding programmes. Going forward, we must better identify the barriers that prevent widespread breastfeeding; address those obstacles; and track our progress, especially in the most disadvantaged communities.

World Breastfeeding Week is an opportunity to renew global focus on the critical role of breastfeeding in reducing childhood illness and mortality. As we do so, we should recall the findings of the 2008 Lancet Nutrition Series: that a non-breastfed child is 14 times more likely to die in the first six months than an exclusively breastfed child. And we should note that breastfeeding in the first two years of life can also prevent stunting. Compared to their well-nourished peers, stunted children are inches shorter, more vulnerable to disease, five times more likely to die from diarrhoea, and never able to reach their full cognitive or earning capacity.

In June this year, governments and partners from over 80 countries met in Washington, DC for the “Child Survival Call to Action: A Promise Renewed” to pledge their commitment to end preventable child deaths. Breastfeeding, especially exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of an infant’s life, plays a critical role in preventing illness and death from diarrhoea and pneumonia -- two of the most common causes of childhood illness and mortality. As we renew commitments to childhood survival, accelerating and scaling up programmes to improve breastfeeding practices must be a priority for national governments and development partners.

UNICEF joins the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action in urging all partners in child survival and nutrition to step up efforts to protect and promote breastfeeding practices.

Together, we can reach mothers everywhere and help them give their children the start in life which they deserve and the futures of which they dream.



Anthony Lake  
Executive Director