

# Breastfeeding and the Sustainable Development Goals

## Factsheet

Breastfeeding is a critical first step on a child's path to a healthy future. But as a foundation for a child's future health and well-being, breastfeeding also is a critical element of worldwide development efforts to create a more healthy, prosperous and sustainable planet.

As a practical step towards protecting the survival and health of babies and women, breastfeeding is a central part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is linked to many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

For example:

**Goals 1, 8 and 10** focus on ending poverty, promoting economic growth and reducing inequalities. Breastfeeding is associated with adding US\$302 billion annually in additional income to the world economy – nearly 0.5 per cent of world gross national industry.

**Goals 2 and 3** are concerned with hunger, health and well-being. Breastfeeding is a vital source of nutrition that can save children's lives and contribute to improved health outcomes for children and mothers.

**Goal 4** is about education. The association between breastfeeding and higher IQs and educational attainment can contribute to efforts to achieving global learning targets.

**Goal 5** centres on gender equality. Breastfeeding is linked to critical equality issues including birth spacing and workplace rights.

**Goals 12** tackles sustainable consumption. Breastmilk does not require industry for production and is created and consumed with a minimal ecological footprint.

As national governments throughout the world develop budgets and action plans to achieve the SDGs, breastfeeding should be a priority. Breastfeeding contributes not only to achieving many of the SDGs, it is also a critical component of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health.

## Key messages

As a foundation of nutrition and health, breastfeeding contributes to the achievement of a more prosperous and sustainable future for people and planet.

- Breastfeeding can help achieve many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals including goals on poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality and sustainable consumption.
- Increased breastfeeding is associated with US\$302 billion annually in additional income – nearly 0.5 per cent of world gross national income.<sup>1</sup>
- Breastfeeding is potentially one of the top nutrition interventions for reducing under-five mortality.<sup>2</sup>
- Breastfeeding is linked to critical gender equality issues including workplace rights.<sup>3</sup>
- Breastmilk does not require industry for production and is created and consumed with a minimal ecological footprint.

Breastfeeding is linked to better nutrition, health and greater well-being for children and mothers, which contributes to central goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

- Increasing the number of children who are breastfed could save the lives of more than 820,000 children under age 5.<sup>4</sup>
- Children who are breastfed for longer periods have lower rates of infectious disease and death than children who are breastfed for shorter periods or who are not breastfed.<sup>5</sup>
- Longer periods of breastfeeding are associated with a reduction in a child's risk of being overweight or obese.<sup>6</sup>
- Breastfeeding could also prevent the death of 20,000 women a year from breast cancer.<sup>7</sup>
- Breastfeeding is associated with a reduction a woman's risk of diabetes and might reduce rates of ovarian cancer.<sup>8</sup>
- Providing increased support and resources for breastfeeding will allow women to do the best for themselves, their babies and their families while playing an active role in the workforce and fulfilling their potential.

Breastfeeding is linked to Goal 5 on gender equality, especially for working women who want to give their children the best nutrition at the start of life.<sup>9</sup>

- Only 31 per cent of 159 countries have relevant national legislation that comply with the International Labour Organization's recommendations on providing adequate hygienic conditions for women who breastfeed.

- Globally, 40.6 per cent of employed women have a statutory right to maternity leave.
- Work is one of the leading barriers to breastfeeding and contributes to women's decision to stop breastfeeding early.<sup>10</sup>
- A study on breastfeeding indicated that interventions such as maternity leave, workplace support and employment status of mothers led to a 30 per cent increase in breastfeeding rates.<sup>11</sup>
- Breastfeeding can empower women with greater reproductive autonomy because it is linked to birth spacing.<sup>12</sup>

#### Breastfeeding is linked to Goal 4: Ensure quality education.

- Breastfeeding is associated with an IQ increase of 3 to 4 points.<sup>13</sup>
- Greater cognitive ability can lead to better learning outcomes, a priority for Goal 4 of the SDGs.<sup>14</sup>
- Breastfeeding is a critical element of comprehensive early childhood development and care, which is a specific target for Goal 4.

#### Breastfeeding is critical for the health of women and babies; but it also contributes to the health of the planet.

- Breastmilk does not require industry for production and is created and consumed with a minimal ecological footprint.<sup>15</sup>
- In contrast, breastmilk substitutes need energy to manufacture, distribute and prepare, all which leave ecological footprint.<sup>16</sup>
- Water, paper, metal are required to package breastmilk substitutes, while breastmilk is a natural and renewable food.<sup>17</sup>

#### Breastfeeding plays a critical role in the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health, part of the Every Woman, Every Child movement.

- The Every Woman Every Child global strategy highlights early initiation of breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding for six months, both of which are essential for achieving SDG targets on child survival, health and nutrition.
- Supporting breastfeeding in fragile and humanitarian contexts, part of the Every Woman Every Child global strategy, is essential for children, adolescents and women who are affected by conflict, disasters and other emergencies.
- The Every Woman Every Child movement provides a vital partnership platform to advocate for greater support to breastfeeding mothers around the globe.

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- <sup>1</sup> Rollins, Nigel, C., et al., 'Why Invest, and What it Will Take to Improve Breastfeeding Practices?', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.
- <sup>2</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>3</sup> Rollins, Nigel, C., et al., 'Why Invest, and What it Will Take to Improve Breastfeeding Practices?', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.
- <sup>4</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>5</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>6</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>7</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>8</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>9</sup> International Labour Organization, *Maternity and Paternity at Work: Law and practices across the world*, ILO, Geneva, 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Rollins, Nigel, C., et al., 'Why Invest, and What it Will Take to Improve Breastfeeding Practices?', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.
- <sup>11</sup> Sinha, Bireshwar, et al., 'Interventions to improve breastfeeding outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *Acta Paediatrica*, no. 104, pp. 114-134. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apa.13127/epdf>
- <sup>12</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>13</sup> Victora, Cesar, G., et al., 'Breastfeeding in the 21st Century: Epidemiology, mechanism and lifelong effect', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 475-490.
- <sup>14</sup> Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', A/70/L.1, 25 September 2015. [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E)
- <sup>15</sup> Rollins, Nigel, C., et al., 'Why Invest, and What it Will Take to Improve Breastfeeding Practices?', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.
- <sup>16</sup> Rollins, Nigel, C., et al., 'Why Invest, and What it Will Take to Improve Breastfeeding Practices?', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.
- <sup>17</sup> Rollins, Nigel, C., et al., 'Why Invest, and What it Will Take to Improve Breastfeeding Practices?', *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.