Support breastfeeding for a healthier planet

World Breastfeeding Week 2020 (#WBW2020) highlights the links between breastfeeding and planetary health. We present a framework for understanding these links, outline some of the challenges and present some possible solutions.

"We need to acknowledge that ‘our house is on fire’ and that the next generation requires us to act quickly to reduce carbon footprints in every sphere of life... Breastfeeding is a part of this jigsaw, and urgent investment is needed across the sector."

Joffe, Webster & Shenker. (2019) 1

OBJECTIVES OF #WBW2020

INFORM
people about the links between breastfeeding and the environment/climate change

ANCHOR
breastfeeding as a climate-smart decision

ENGAGE
with individuals and organisations for greater impact

GALVANISE
action on improving the health of the planet and people through breastfeeding
Breastfeeding and planetary health

The concept of planetary health has been defined as ‘the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends’. The interconnected nature of people and the planet requires that we find sustainable solutions that benefit both.

Sustainable development meets the needs of the current generation without compromising future generations. Breastfeeding is key to all of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Climate change and environmental degradation are some of the most urgent challenges facing our world today. Emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) – carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, methane and others due to human activity – have increased global temperatures by over 1°C since pre-industrial times. Interestingly, GHG emissions appear to have dropped due to the impact of our responses to another urgent challenge, the more immediate COVID-19 pandemic. Several lessons can be learned from that and applied to the challenge of climate change. Environmental degradation resulting from pollutants in the air, water or food supply, the over-utilisation of scarce resources, excessive waste and the destruction of habitats is often caused by human activity. Our food production systems and consumption patterns are significant contributors to climate change and environmental degradation. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that we are all affected and an immediate coordinated societal response is required. We can all do something to reduce our carbon footprint and ecological footprint starting with how we feed our babies. Ongoing health emergencies such as COVID-19 also pose challenges that affect infant feeding.

Food and feeding matter

Breastfeeding is one of the best investments for saving infant lives and improving the health, social and economic development of individuals and nations. Creating an enabling environment for optimal infant and young child feeding patterns is a societal imperative.

So, what is needed to create an enabling environment and improve breastfeeding practices? Protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding are all important strategies at structural, settings and individual levels (see diagram below). Coordinated actions for optimal infant feeding during normal times and in emergencies are essential to ensure that the nutritional needs of all babies are met.

Investing in support for breastfeeding

Supporting breastfeeding has short- and long-term impact on planetary health. It is an urgent imperative and we must intensify the conversations, call for more robust research and engage all relevant sectors to take action. As urgent as the COVID-19 crisis and responses are, there is an ongoing need to advocate for breastfeeding as a public health intervention that saves lives and prevents infections and illnesses in the population at large. It is our duty as global citizens to act.

#WBW2020 matters now more than ever!

From “Why invest, and what it will take to improve breastfeeding practices?” by Rollins et al. (2016).

Breastfeeding may look like an unlikely soldier in the war against climate change but can contribute to altering the scoreboard.

Dr. Taru Jindal, 2020
Over time, the scale of human impact on the natural world is massive. Depletion and destruction of natural resources and an increase in the emission of major GHG are at their highest levels for at least the past 800,000 years. We need to protect our planet and our own health by (i) using resources such as land, water and energy sources responsibly, (ii) conserving biodiversity and (iii) consuming with care. Several of the SDGs provide guidance for specific actions to combat environmental degradation and the climate crisis. Breastfeeding is linked to all of these SDGs and is key to achieving sustainable development.

Although there have been many advances in global health in the past few decades, there are several emerging challenges for example natural disasters, infectious disease outbreaks such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well as a lack of adequate health systems. A number of countries are facing the double burden of over- and under-nutrition. Noncommunicable diseases are also on the rise. Food insecurity affects millions of people especially in conflict and disaster-prone areas. Our diets and food consumption patterns are underlying factors to these issues. Breastfeeding can contribute to short- and long-term health, good nutrition and food security in normal and emergency situations. The protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding before, during and after emergencies can pose additional challenges that we must all step up to.

Feeding with BMS from farm-to-table affects the environment and climate due to its production, packaging, distribution and preparation methods. On the other hand, breastmilk production only requires the additional food that a mother needs to consume, therefore using fewer natural resources and resulting in almost no waste. Scaling up optimal breastfeeding could prevent more than 823,000 child and 20,000 maternal deaths each year. Not breastfeeding is associated with lower intelligence and results in economic losses of about $302 billion annually.

Only about 40% of all babies born annually are exclusively breastfed until six months of age and only 45% continue any breastfeeding for up to two years. Often, there is a lack of support to breastfeed, whether in the health system, workplace or community. For example, the lack of maternity/parental leave and workplace support make optimal breastfeeding additionally challenging. In emergency situations, breastfeeding practices may be compromised and for those infants needing an alternative, donated human milk may not be readily available and the supply chain for BMS may often be broken. In 2019, the total market value of milk formula was about US$71 billion with sales growth particularly strong in low- and middle-income countries. In addition to infant formula, there is a growing market of follow-up formulas and toddler milks, which are deemed unnecessary according to WHO. The unethical marketing practices of the BMS industry continue to worsen the situation.

Lifelong Positive Health Effects of Optimal Breastfeeding

- Women/Parents: helps with birth spacing, reduces risk of breast and ovarian cancers and lowers the risk of hypertension
- Children: combats infectious diseases, decreases incidence and severity of diarrhoea, lowers respiratory infections and acute otitis media, prevents dental caries and malocclusion and increases intelligence
Dairy farming and the carbon trap

The main ingredient of most BMS is cows’ milk. Dairy farming typically releases substantial amounts of methane and other GHG. Furthermore, feed rations or grazing areas needed by dairy cattle can lead to deforestation. This in turn increases the amount of carbon dioxide, as trees are no longer available to absorb it and provide the carbon trap to prevent climate change. Feed rations for dairy cows are derived from cereals and soybeans grown with intensive use of pesticides and fertilisers. This leaves behind another major ecological footprint.

Energy sources and carbon emissions

The production, packaging, distribution and preparation processes of BMS, as with most food production, requires energy. If the source of energy is fossil fuels, the CFP will be higher. The Paris Agreement on climate change encourages governments and industries to work towards reducing carbon emissions and increasing renewable energy to meet global climate goals. There are fortunately some ongoing efforts to follow this recommendation.

Waste in our environment

Waste is another factor to consider in terms of ecological footprint. Feeding one million babies with formula for two years requires, on average, approximately 150 million cans of formula. Metal cans, if not recycled, are likely to end up in landfill sites, while plastic, aluminium and paper waste often end up in our oceans.

Water footprint of BMS

Water footprint refers to the total volume of fresh water used to produce the goods and services consumed by an individual or commodity or which are produced by a business. BMS production and preparation require water. Fresh water is a scarce natural resource and commodity and therefore needs to be protected. Calculating the water footprint of milk products is complex as it depends on the geographical location, dairy farming system and other factors. However, all efforts to conserve, recycle and replenish our water sources are essential.

Ecological footprint of breastfeeding

Breastfeeding for six months after birth requires, on average, an additional 500 kcal of energy a day. Although breastfeeding may require an additional intake of water depending on factors such as weather and activity levels, there is no evidence of the amount needed beyond meeting physiological requirements. Different types of food have varying CFPs, with predominantly plant-based diets being generally considered healthier for the planet. All parents should be supported to make healthy nutritional and planetary choices especially throughout the reproductive continuum, which includes breastfeeding. Depending on our diets, the CFP will differ. Direct breastfeeding and hand expression of breastmilk are efficient in terms of reducing waste and saving energy and other resources. Although using a breast pump to express milk does require additional equipment, most of these are reusable and thus better for the environment compared to BMS feeding.

Comparing carbon footprints

Accurately calculating and comparing the CFP of BMS and breastfeeding are complex tasks and only a few studies have been carried out. The most common methodology used is the life cycle assessment (LCA), which takes into account carbon dioxide equivalent emissions from farm-to-table processes and involves many variables, factors and assumptions. Two studies that have focused on the CFP of BMS and breastfeeding are presented here:

- A comparative model using data from Brazil, China, UK and Vietnam showed the CFP associated with breastfeeding (including additional energy required by breastfeeding mothers) was 43%, 53%, 40% and 46% lower than the CFP associated with BMS production and use. Differences principally reflected BMS production methods and diets of breastfeeding mothers in the respective countries. Methods for calculating CFP including whether bottle sterilisation was included were also important.

- A report of case studies from six countries in the South- and Asia-Pacific region shows how much GHG emissions arise from milk formula sold. The report revealed that milk formula production is emerging as an important source of GHG emissions. The increasing use of unnecessary follow-on and toddler milk formulas in all study countries is of great concern.
Breastfeeding counselling is essential for increasing breastfeeding rates. According to WHO, all counselling can be considered support but not all support interventions involve counselling. Counselling is a process and interaction between counsellors and women/parents and is therefore not intended to be a "top-down" intervention of "telling them what to do". The aim of breastfeeding counselling is to empower women/parents to breastfeed, while respecting their personal situations and wishes. It may be offered by either professional or lay/peer counsellors, or a combination of both. Breastfeeding counselling includes listening, empathising, building confidence, giving information and suggestions and letting women/parents decide what is best for them. It also includes giving practical help and demonstrating how to position and attach a baby at the breast and manage common problems.

**SDGs as a framework for planetary health**

The SDGs are about people, the planet, prosperity and peace. Breastfeeding is one of many sustainable solutions to planetary health. The SDGs provide a framework for addressing several of the current challenges to planetary health. Ensuring wellbeing includes ending poverty, hunger and malnutrition, promoting good health as well as ensuring the right to decent work, gender equality, inclusiveness and peace. An enabling environment for breastfeeding requires an essential package of interventions: maternity/parental protection, training of health professionals and community workers, the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), access to breastfeeding counselling as well as implementation and monitoring of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and relevant World Health Assembly (WHA) resolutions.

**Societal support**

All women/parents have the right to be supported by society to breastfeed optimally. They can benefit from many different kinds of support depending on their sociocultural context. Support can come from their families, communities, health systems and workplaces. Breastfeeding counselling is a type of support delivered directly to women/parents and infants by health workers and counsellors trained specifically to help them. When breastfeeding counselling is available and accessible to women/parents, the duration and exclusivity of breastfeeding is increased.

**Breastfeeding counselling is essential**

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**What you can do**

- Align national and international policies and guidance on breastfeeding and IYCF with the SDG agenda and other environment/climate initiatives.
- Ensure that a public health perspective is taken to strengthen BFHI and breastfeeding counselling among the general population including during emergencies.
- Raise awareness among decision-makers to recognise the contribution of breastfeeding to food security and environmental sustainability.
- Advocate for policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions from the BMS industry.
- Ensure that the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and relevant World Health Assembly (WHA) resolutions are fully implemented and monitored.
- Enact paid family leave and workplace breastfeeding policies based on the International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Convention C183 as the minimum standard.

- Advocate for increased financing, monitoring and implementation of better policies and interventions to provide families the support for breastfeeding that they need, especially breastfeeding counselling.
- Inform communities about the impact of formula feeding on the environment using a variety of communication techniques and influencers.
- Sensitise journalists and the media to stimulate public debate on the links between breastfeeding and the environment/climate change.
- Allocate resources for additional research on the climate/environmental impact of BMS.
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Breastfeeding counselling should be organised, predictable, scheduled and ongoing to be most effective. All women/parents should be offered planned contact sessions during the antenatal and postnatal periods. Contact should be frequent in the early months, with a total of at least six contacts and support continued until the child is two years old.

Lay and peer supporters need basic training in breastfeeding counselling and practical skills. Health and allied professionals need breastfeeding counselling skills and additional clinical skills to manage and overcome problems. It is also essential to have expert resource people to act as academic teachers, trainers, program managers and supervisors. Their role is to ensure effective capacity building and skills development at all levels, and to maintain and update healthcare standards. The development of consistent competencies throughout different levels requires investment that has corresponding benefits and economic returns.

Some families may be more vulnerable and require additional breastfeeding support. Vulnerable situations include emergencies, special needs or other medical conditions affecting the breastfeeding dyad. The increase in climate and environment-related disasters are a growing concern as the risks of under-nutrition and child mortality are much higher than during normal times. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is another emergency that leaves families with children in an extremely vulnerable position. In every emergency, it is necessary to assess and act to protect and support the nutritional needs and care of both breastfed and non-breastfed infants and young children. It is vital that national and international evidence-based guidelines are aligned to ensure that consistent messages reach the public.

Donations and non-targeted distributions of BMS can interfere and undermine breastfeeding. Unreliable supply chains of BMS and the unhygienic conditions that commonly prevail in emergency situations make breastfeeding the safest option. In the case of COVID-19, WHO and UNICEF recommend breastfeeding with necessary hygienic precautions. This may be revised as further evidence becomes available. The Operational Guidance on Infant Feeding in Emergencies (OG-IFE) explains the key actions to protect and support optimal IYCF in emergencies.

Ongoing support across the first 1000 days

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Building knowledge and skills at all levels

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Leaving no one behind

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The Green Feeding Advocacy Campaign

Green Feeding is an advocacy campaign to protect, promote and support breastfeeding, and to safeguard parents against commercial pressures and misleading claims by formula companies. It includes community support for exclusive breastfeeding for six months and the addition of appropriate complementary foods for older babies. Families should be allowed to make feeding decisions free from commercial pressures: for babies, toddlers and young children. Sustained breastfeeding needs support for as long as the family wants. Home-prepared family foods are minimally processed and so offer value for money. Sustainable local agriculture provides foods that are biodiverse, reliable and culturally appropriate. Community support can be undermined by marketing and promotion of ultra-processed foods. The Green Feeding campaign includes both the carbon footprint (CFP) to assess the climate impact of production and consumption and also the ecological footprint to assess the environmental impact.
In conclusion, ensuring planetary health is an urgent task for all of us. Much advocacy is needed to accelerate the achievement of the 2015-2030 SDGs, the Paris Agreement targets and the World Health Assembly 2025 breastfeeding target. Sustainable production and consumption patterns will safeguard our natural resources, our environment and help mitigate climate change. Breastfeeding contributes positively towards planetary health in several ways - it is sustainable, ecological and good for human health. The current global scenario with slow progress in improving breastfeeding rates, a growing BMS industry and ongoing emergencies is a real concern. Strategies to protect, promote and support breastfeeding are well-known and need to be implemented and monitored. Breastfeeding counselling is known to be effective and should be offered as a key feature of support to all breastfeeding families. The WABA Warm Chain of Support for Breastfeeding campaign places the breastfeeding dyad at the core and follows the first 1000 days timeline. It adopts a public health approach and strives to link different stakeholders by coordinating efforts across settings to provide a continuum of care, consistent messages and referral systems, leaving no one behind. A warm chain of support creates an enabling environment that empowers all women/parents to breastfeed optimally. Together, we can achieve a win-win situation for humanity and the planet.

We need to see the whole of society as responsible and accountable for low breastfeeding rates, as one of several indicators, demonstrating whether we are orientated to planet health as well as human health.

Dr. Nigel Rollins, 2020
REFERENCES


9. See reference 2


11. See reference 3


27. See reference 24

29. See reference 2
33. See reference 31
35. See reference 31
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