

Transcript of the UN Radio Interview with Dr. Miriam Labbok by Ms. Dianne Penn

Five years ago, the world took concrete action to encourage women to breastfeed their babies. The Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding aimed to improve babies' health and survival by making breastfeeding a government priority. Dr. Miriam Labbok of the University of North Carolina is the North American representative for WABA, the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action. She says the strategy was a milestone for mothers, babies and the world.

LABBOK: The Global Strategy was a huge step forward on the part of the World Health Assembly and UNICEF executive board. In the year 2002 it was decided it was time to act, not just talk, about breastfeeding. It's quite unusual for UN organizations to say 'with urgency' about public health issues, but this particular strategy calls with urgency for all countries to act, to support and enable women to succeed with optimal infant feeding.

PENN: It's been five years since that strategy was called into play. Have governments around the world been supporting and enabling women in regards to breastfeeding?

LABBOK: I believe that there's been a very positive attitude shift. However, there's many things that have stood in the way of public action. Today with the huge HIV pandemic, much of our resources are heading there and towards other elements in public health. The second issue, I think, is the difficulty of working in a public-private driven world. Breastfeeding—nobody can make money off it, you know, there's no product to sell, so we've had difficulty finding a private partner to urge along the public-private sensibilities. Perhaps a third issue right now is that women are still struggling to have their voices heard. So while I'm very optimistic that people are right-hearted and want to do the right thing here, there are some things that are causing a slow-down in the activity that we saw in the 1990s. What is making the difference and what's going to make the difference is people and community action, individual action such as is encouraged by WABA and by the World Breastfeeding Week. That's what's going to make the difference.

PENN: Exactly why is breastfeeding so important?

LABBOK: In terms of what's optimal for infant feeding, the World Health Organization in the Global Strategy, refers to exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life and continued breastfeeding up to two years, or longer, depending on the mother and child's needs, and that is really the biological minimum to ensure that the baby gets all the immune factors and immune stimulation it needs from its mother's milk. The exclusive breastfeeding has been confirmed from research, that a child really doesn't need any other food until about six months, because breast milk supplies everything an infant needs up until that time. There's one other aspect of optimal feeding which is immediate skin-to-skin and early initiation, and that is the theme of this year's National Breastfeeding Week. A recent study found that breastfeeding within the first hour is a

real life saver, partly because it gives that child immediate protection against hypothermia, which is loss of warmth; and secondly, because it initiates that biological flow that leads to successful, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months.

PENN: This is the fifth anniversary. What do you see as the action to move ahead?

LABBOK: Perhaps the most important thing that's happened to take the Global Strategy a step further is there with the celebration fifteen years since the Innocenti Declaration of 1990, when the world got together and said we should ensure that every country has a national authority on breastfeeding and a multi-sectoral committee to make it happen; two, we should practice the ten steps to successful breastfeeding, which is now called the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative; (and) three, every country should legislate the international code of marketing on breast milk substitutes, which protects against aggressive advertising of artificial feeding methods. And there is a pamphlet that came out of that meeting as well as a declaration that spells out steps necessary to implement the strategy. In addition to that, the World Health Organization has published a book for countries to follow. So, we have the, if you will, what people should do in the Innocenti+15 declaration, and we have what countries should do in the WHO next steps documented. Between these two efforts, and with this effort to keep this issue alive, I think we have a very sunny future for continued increases in exclusive breastfeeding, optimal infant feeding, and health and well-being for both mothers and children.

NARRATOR: Dr. Miriam Labbok is Director of the Centre for Infant and Young Child Feeding and Care at the School of Public Health, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

For listening to the programme please go to:

http://www.un.org/radio/pro_archive.asp?featureID=4

Look in the June archives and click on "Celebrating Five years of the Global Breastfeeding Strategy"

Note from WABA: The full title of the document discussed in the interview is Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding. Also see WABA press release

http://www.waba.org.my/pdf/PR_GSIYCF.pdf