

WABA turns 21!

Meeting the Challenges - Nurturing the Future



World Alliance for
Breastfeeding Action

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While some of us may remember, there are many who may not be aware that the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) was born on the evening of 14 February 1991 – yes, on Valentine’s Day - in a little restaurant in downtown New York, following a UNICEF meeting to follow up on the Innocenti Declaration 1990, and formulate strategies for a coordinated global effort to protect, promote and support breastfeeding, with 17 national and international groups participating. Current Chairperson Emeritus Dato’ Anwar Fazal, who thought of the idea of WABA and also the name, stated at that time, *“the UNICEF meeting showed us how much each group was doing. More importantly, it showed how much more needed to be done and that there was a real urgency for popular mobilisation on a scale we had never before dared to dream.”*

On this date 21 years ago, WABA began as a global force for happiness, riding on the impetus of the Innocenti Declaration to bring about the needed change for healthier mothers and babies, and by extension, a better world. WABA was created as the people’s force to mobilize actions to protect, promote and support breastfeeding. As a network of networks and organisations, the thrust of WABA’s work has been to provide common platforms to facilitate collective action globally, the World Breastfeeding Week campaign being the main avenue.

WABA’s inception was essentially the peoples response to the on-going challenges of the "bottle baby scandal" and the undermining of breastfeeding cultures across the world. Through the years, WABA has in collaboration with its Core Partners and members of the broader network worked to uphold fundamental aspects of its goals, and has asserted that the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (4 and 5) set forth in 2000, requires increasing rates of early, exclusive and continued breastfeeding, protected, promoted and supported in the context of women’s empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality and, poverty reduction.

Twenty one years on, WABA’s work for breastfeeding faces new critical challenges. According to UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children Report 2011, 136.7 million babies are born worldwide and 32.6 % of them are breastfed exclusively in the first 6 months – a figure that hasn’t significantly changed globally over the years. As we work with our partners to stem the influence and power of the babyfood industry, the complementary work of supporting mothers to breastfeed, and stimulating mass public mobilization and information outreach to galvanize support for breastfeeding becomes increasingly vital.

Globally, the specter of severe environmental degradation and dire implications of climate change looms large now and for years to come. Studies have noted that the carbon footprint created by the formula-milk industry – from sourcing, producing, and packaging its products, to the effects of how it is used, destroyed or recycled – and the associated environmental costs are massive. Breastfeeding is thoroughly eco-friendly, and has a far smaller carbon footprint than breastmilk substitutes. These environmental concerns are compounded by increasing incidences of natural disasters (both natural and man-made) that have wreaked havoc across the globe. It is well recognized that breastfeeding can provide safe and sustainable food for infants and young children in emergencies (both natural and man-made), while its high immunity capabilities can protect against diarrhoea and respiratory infections among others. This highlights the need to ensure adequate care and nutrition of

pregnant and lactating women. It is also very clear that within efforts to address climate change and environmental disasters, the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding are even more critical for us as a movement.

Another predicament facing us in the 21st Century is the crisis of an increase in non-communicable diseases (NCD) including obesity, especially childhood obesity. Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and respiratory disease accounts for around 20% of the world's disease burden (over 300 million disability-adjusted life years lost annually). In 2010 the estimated number of overweight children under the age of five totalled 42 million, with 35 million children coming from the developing world. The WHO notes that childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges facing humankind globally. Associated with development of NCDs in adulthood, childhood obesity is attributable to several factors, but there is growing evidence that childhood obesity is also related to feeding practices in infancy and the early part of life. Recent studies show that there is a positive preventive association between breastfeeding and long term healthy weight maintenance.

We are faced with the added challenges of even more aggressive marketing of baby foods and milks (ie. of follow on formulas and growing up milks) for children of 1, 2, 3, 6 and more years; and of integrating employment/paid work with child care and breastfeeding, especially by women in lower income. A key aspect to overcoming these challenges is informing, educating and engaging young people in breastfeeding advocacy so as to expand our global force for happiness. This is why one of WABA's major priority for the future is nurturing and mobilising young people in our issues, actions and campaigns to protect, promote and support breastfeeding. We therefore have the pleasure to announce the launch of WABA's most recent video "Feed the Future", an outcome of the the WBW 2011 and workshops for young people in Penang, Malaysia. See WABA website: <http://www.waba.org.my/> for a taster of the series of short videos to come.

The Secretariat is grateful to all those who have been contributing to WABA over the years in various capacities, and look forward to continue working with you to meet the challenges ahead. Within the current financial climate it has become increasingly difficult to raise funds for work on breastfeeding and optimal young child feeding. We hope that you will consider making a contribution for the network's sustainability on our 21st Anniversary. Collectively we can continue our common work in the years to come and with many more anniversaries to celebrate our combined achievements!

Sarah Amin, WABA Executive Director

References:

- 1) "State of the World's Children Report 2011" UNICEF, (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/fullreport.php>)
- 2) "What's your milk worth?" (<http://info.babymilkaction.org/news/campaignblog070310>).
- 3) World Breastfeeding Week 2009, "Breastfeeding: A Vital Emergency Response Are you ready?", (<http://worldbreastfeedingweek.net/wbw2009/index.htm>), and "Breastfeeding: a vital emergency response. Are you ready?" Statement by WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan, 31 July 2009 (http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2009/world_breastfeeding_week_20090731/en/)
- 4) "Childhood overweight and obesity", (<http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/childhood/en/>); "Does Formula Feeding contribute to childhood obesity?" (<http://www.cseindia.org/node/3715>), Koletzko B et al, Am J Clin Nutr 2009;89 (suppl) :1S-7S; and Monasta L et al, Obesity Reviews 2010;11:695-708.