

## Environmental Toxins and Breastfeeding

Years after WBW 1997, a new and challenging aspect of breastfeeding and the environment emerged: this was the scare of toxins in breastmilk. From the fact that toxins do get lodged in fatty tissues in the human body, and that a woman's breasts being one of the main fatty areas posed an issue for the transmission of toxins via breastfeeding. Opponents of breastfeeding capitalised on this and used the media in its favour. The breastfeeding movement has consequently faced repeated media stories that discourage women from breastfeeding. Most of these media scares happen around WBW to counter positive breastfeeding promotion messages.



WABA worked with several key environmental groups to help reframe the issue and reformulate messages so that the focus was rightly placed on the toxicity in the environment, rather than on the mother and her breastmilk. Once it was clear that blaming the mother as the transmitter of toxins was disempowering to women and detrimental to the work of the breastfeeding movement, the environmental movement agreed to collaborate on new strategies and joint communication. These new messages were accurate and shifted the responsibility to the true sources of pollution rather than victimising mothers. This was a major achievement in forging genuine partnerships with another social movements. The WABA Secretariat facilitated such headway and were supported by the technical knowledge of WABA pioneer, Penny van Esterik and Alison Linnecar of IBFAN/GIFA.

Ever since dioxins contained in the herbicide Agent Orange were measured in breastmilk in the 1980s, media reports focused on the "contamination of breastmilk" and pointed to "The Dangers of Breastfeeding". On the other hand, media titles merely gave a passing mention to 'The Risks of Formula Feeding' – despite conclusive evidence that severe infections caused by contamination of formula by harmful bacteria can cause disease, disabilities and death for vulnerable babies. Alison Linnecar recalls the early steps taken by WABA and subsequently by IBFAN in sharing accurate information and skilful advocacy messages on the subject to help sharpen the responses of the breastfeeding movement when further faced by faulty media scares.

*We are in Arusha, Tanzania, for WABA's 2002 Global Forum. Far away in the distance the imposing outline of Mount Kilimanjaro beckons us onwards and upwards, yet reminds us that it is a very tough climb indeed. And in the midst of the HIV/AIDS pandemic it is tough indeed to scale up our work to protect, promote and support*