

MEDIA RELEASE

UNICEF SAYS EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING OF SOMALI CHILDREN COULD SAVE THOUSANDS OF LIVES EVERY YEAR

NAIROBI, KENYA, 31 July 2009: In Somalia, where one child in every ten dies before its first birthday, exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months would be one of the most effective life-saving interventions for thousands of children.

This is according to UNICEF Representative to Somalia Ms. Rozanne Chorlton. Commenting at the start of World Breastfeeding Week (1-7 August) Ms. Chorlton said, "Breastfeeding is extremely important among the preventive measures to reduce malnutrition, death and disease among young Somali children. In fact it is critical, when one out of every six Somali children is acutely malnourished and young children bear the burden of the lack of clean water and adequate sanitation."

The theme of World Breastfeeding Week 2009 is 'Breastfeeding, a Vital Emergency Response' and in Somalia's emergency context UNICEF is highlighting the significance of breastfeeding for the survival and development of Somali infants and young children.

With almost half the Somali population in need of emergency humanitarian assistance, breastfeeding is a vital emergency response that has the potential to prevent 13 to 15 per cent of all under five deaths. Scientific evidence documented in the Lancet journal has established that exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months can have the single largest impact on child survival of all preventive interventions. Beyond six months, breastfeeding combined with appropriate complementary food, contributes to a further six per cent reduction in deaths among children under five.

National surveys in Somalia show that less than ten per cent of infants under six months of age are exclusively breastfed. The near-universal Somali practice of discarding 'colostrum' (the first milk, full of essential nutrients and immunity), delaying the initiation of breastfeeding and using unhygienically-prepared formula and powdered milk, are contributing factors towards Somalia's global acute malnutrition levels of 18.6 per cent: significantly above the emergency threshold of 15 per cent.

Reasons for low levels of breastfeeding in Somalia include lack of knowledge of the importance of the practice, vigorous advertising of infant formulas and the persistence of inaccurate information including the myths that malnourished mothers are unable to breastfeed, that stress dries up breast milk, or that children under six months old need to be given water.

"It is alarming that despite the enormous benefits of breastfeeding, the practice is declining by the day in Somalia," said Ms. Fitsum Assefa, Nutrition Specialist in UNICEF Somalia. "Formula and powdered milk may be popular ways to feed infants and children, but people should know that infant formula and powdered milk offer no immune system protection and can harm the infant's gut defense mechanism, making children more prone to infection, especially in Somalia where hygiene and sanitation conditions are very poor", added Ms. Assefa.

"Although interventions that aim to promote breastfeeding are vital for child survival, the unfortunate reality is that not enough emphasis and investment on those interventions are given in Somalia," said Ms. Chorlton, UNICEF Representative to Somalia. "It is crucial that communities and families support and encourage mothers to breastfeed their infants and ensure the well-being of mothers themselves. UNICEF is committed to mobilizing resources to expand efforts of promoting and supporting breastfeeding, and to a long term and sustained programming that would address this issue at the scale it deserves."

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