

## Regional WHO/UNICEF Consultation on Breastfeeding Protection, Promotion and Support.

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On behalf of the  
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On behalf of the Regional Director of the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, I would like to join Dr.Omi in welcoming you to this special Regional WHO/UNICEF Consultation on Breastfeeding Protection, Promotion, and Support.

That our two organizations – WHO and UNICEF -- are coming together in yet another joint effort should come as no surprise: successful work in adolescent sexual and reproductive health conducted with UNFPA, the joint UNICEF/WHO Child Survival strategy, the follow up to that strategy in Vientiane, the recent completion of a Joint meeting involving WHO and UNICEF Regional and Country office staff in Health, Nutrition, Water and Sanitation – all speak to the distinctly healthy state of our collaborative relationship. This is, of course, as it should be – a close professional working relationship between the two global agencies most closely associated with the health of women and children.

What, then, makes this meeting special? What topic has brought together a distinguished gathering of temporary advisors from eighteen countries of the region; resource persons from Brazil, the US, Australia, and Malaysia; observers and agency representatives from Philippine NGOs sitting alongside members of the Philippine Senate; the Employer's Confederation with the ILO; USAID and the CDC; and a Secretariat made up of WHO and UNICEF staff from country offices, regional

offices, and headquarters in Geneva and New York? Whatever it is – it better be good!

Over the next three days we are going to discuss a topic that is not only of immense importance to the health and well-being of babies and children, mothers and fathers. We're going to talk about things of the greatest international significance; about issues that cross local, national and international political and economic lines. We will discuss concerns and cases that involve doctors and nurses, health workers and community workers, lawyers and judges, international economists and private sector Financial Officers, union leaders and employers, world trade organizations and local markets; international conventions and local laws. We will hear stories of mothers turned activists, of incidents that have brought people into the streets; of a subject associated with protests and boycotts so well organized by citizen groups that, at one time, they subdued even mighty multi-national corporations. We will discuss issues that were on the local news last night, and that will be on the international news today.

The irony is that the stories aren't about anything new or inherently exciting. Everything we will discuss from today until Friday is about something entirely natural, about a gift that mothers have been giving their children since the beginning of human existence, and probably even before 'human' existence.

If it is so natural and such an ancient practice – why are we still discussing it? Why is the topic never neutral? To some it's social and to others anti-social. In a way that has fascinated sociologists for the last century, it has distinguished members of one socioeconomic class from another in an unending saga of jealousy, imitation, and role-reversal, as class definitions of what is 'modern' compete with each other across

the economic divide of rich and poor: When the rich do it, the poor don't, and when the poor start to do it, the rich will not.

The simple – and yet most profound – answer is that we will be discussing nothing short of life and death. And, of life, its quality, its longevity, its richness, its ability to fulfill hopes and promises...Of death, the number of children who unnecessarily die because of a totally avoidable cause; the roughly 160,000 children dying annually in eastern and south-eastern Asia whose deaths are attributed to something as preventable and as imminently correctable as “sub-optimal breastfeeding.”

Yes, the topic is breastfeeding. The word creates an immediate mental image of protection and safety. Imagine it -- the mother breastfeeding her child -- what do you see: a friend you know sitting with her baby on a park bench, yourself as a mother supporting a new life, a father hovering over his wife and new daughter – [incidentally, new fathers of breastfed children always ‘hover’. ] What do you see: a logo, a great work of art, an international symbol of peace and harmony?

With this imagery in our minds, we have to ask ourselves why this is still a topic of such concern and even, at times, conflict. As the experts challenge us: why is something that “involves no out-of-pocket expenses, where there exists universal consensus on best practices,” something that we, or someone close to us, knows how to do and can even show us how to do it – why isn't it practiced by all? Why is the number of babies exclusively breastfed from birth to 6 months not uniformly increasing, or at least at such a high level by now that it represents universal acceptance and practice? Why are breastfeeding rates in some countries actually decreasing? We also need to look at the positive examples – consider closely and

critically the experiences in countries – like Cambodia – where breastfeeding rates are on the rise. What's their secret?

Or is there a secret at all? Is it just common sense that will tell us that where there is adequate political commitment, where resources are put into community education and communication, where women and their families have their questions answered and their fears resolved, where the influence of outside interest groups with agendas other than breastfeeding is kept to a minimum, or arrested entirely... under these conditions breastfeeding will thrive?

This is a consultation. To me, that means we all have something to learn from each other. For better or worse, I've been a participant in many 'consultations' – I even enjoy being considered an 'Advisor' by some. But this week, our participation has to go beyond learning and beyond advice. We have to hold each other to action – personal action; personal action that can be translated into change -- in institutions, communities, and households.

Last night, on the news, I saw some brave women outside the Supreme Court in Manila. They were willing to take a drastic personal action – to take it publicly though peacefully, but at risk of ridicule and rejection by their fellow citizens, and maybe even their families. At the very least, they knew that what they did would not be universally accepted. But they acted courageously and boldly -- out of personal conviction, out of their own code of conduct and ethics -- to bring attention to something they believe in fervently: Breastfeeding and its Protection -- the topic of this consultation! The challenge is now to us. Let's see how courageous we can be – how far we are willing to go to promote and support it.

Thank you.