

MEDIA RELEASE

World Breastfeeding Week 2008

Unite for children: support mothers

Amman, 1 August 2008 - Despite exclusive breastfeeding being the most complete form of nutrition for infants, figures are not progressing in the Middle-East and North Africa.

Exclusive breastfeeding has a wide array of long-term benefits for a child's health, growth, immunity and cognitive development. Yet, insufficient knowledge of the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding from 0-6 months remains a widespread cause for stagnation in the region, where the practice reaches only 28 per cent of newborns.

Even though countries in the region have seen gradual improvement in the promotion and duration of the practice, the rate of progress in the past decade is below Eastern and Southern Africa (39%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (30%). Furthermore, the Middle East and North Africa mark is also 10 percentage points below that of developing countries all together (38%).

This year, under the theme "*Mother Support: Going for the Gold*" (partly in the spirit of the Olympics in August), the World Breastfeeding Week calls for greater support to mothers in achieving the gold standard of infant feeding: breastfeeding exclusively for six months, and providing appropriate complementary foods with continued breastfeeding for up to two years or beyond.

Considered a basic child survival intervention, exclusive breastfeeding also holds the key to reducing underweight and stunting of children under-five, which remains prevalent and disquieting in proportions in high priority countries such as Yemen, Sudan and Djibouti. Stunting, an absolute indicator of chronic malnutrition, affects more than half of all under-five children in Yemen where exclusive breastfeeding is also one of the regions' lowest, at 12 per cent.

A myriad of contrasts in a highly diverse region

While countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Iran have retained the highest scores in exclusive breastfeeding in the region for several consecutive years, coverage is still below 50%, leaving no room for complacency and underscoring the urgency of enhanced promotion of the practice among pregnant and lactating mothers, as well as within policy design, involving health practitioners, development partners and communities.

A glance at exclusive breastfeeding practices in the Gulf countries reveals very slow progress, on the one hand, but more critically, it exposes the absence of reliable, recently developed data. While exclusive breastfeeding in the Gulf remains noticeably low on the basis of available figures, results are indicative of a steady percentage of mothers choosing to initiate complementary feeding as early as the first month. Similar patterns are seen in industrialized countries, where exclusive breastfeeding is eclipsed by the growing diversity of artificial breastmilk substitutes in the markets.

In drought-prone countries like Djibouti, Yemen and Sudan, the need for exclusive breastfeeding is all the more important because of the fragile nutritional status of newborns and mothers, which is seriously jeopardized by growing food insecurity as a result of the global rise in food prices and limited access to basic services and humanitarian aid.

Breastfeeding: the human rights angle

“*Support mothers*”, the theme of World Breastfeeding Week 2008, calls for enhanced community-based breastfeeding support systems and the development of national frameworks linking knowledge, as well as existing capacities and resources to protect and support breastfeeding at all levels.

“*Exclusive breastfeeding contributes to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals 1 and 4, in particular. Governments, health-care providers, communities and families all have an important role to play*”, said Sigrid Kaag, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Partnership building in support of mothers in the region has gradually taken the form of “baby-friendly” hospitals by means of an open dialogue between health practitioners, mothers and communities. The mainstreaming of child-feeding interventions as part of national health and development initiatives is also fundamental. Today, about 90% of pre-natal health facilities in Tunisia, Oman and Iran are “baby-friendly”.

* * * * *

For further information, please contact:

Dr. Mahendra Sheth

UNICEF Regional Health & Nutrition Advisor
Middle East and North Africa
E-mail: msheth@unicef.org
Mobile: +96279 666 3399

Wolfgang Friedl

Communication Officer
UNICEF MENA-RO
E-mail: wfriedl@unicef.org
Telephone: 9626-5502-422
Mobile: +96279-573-2745