

Improving Optimal Breastfeeding in Thailand: An Investment in Human Capital

The evidence is stronger than ever that breastfeeding has substantial health and economic benefits for children and women in low-, middle- and high-income countries alike. Improving breastfeeding practices could save hundreds of thousands of lives and add billions of dollars to the global economy each year. Despite its well-established benefits, global and national investments in policies and programmes to support breastfeeding have lagged. As the world focuses on achieving the new Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, it is critical to increase support for breastfeeding as a proven and sustainable approach to drive sustainable progress.

The Lancet Breastfeeding Series

A new series in *The Lancet* medical journal raises visibility around the science and opportunities of breastfeeding. *The Lancet* Breastfeeding Series is the first of its kind to evaluate global breastfeeding trends and inequalities, while also looking at the short- and long-term benefits and consequences for children, mothers, and countries. The series found that:

- Improving breastfeeding practices could **save over 820,000 lives** a year—87 percent of them infants under six months of age.
- Longer breastfeeding is associated with **higher intelligence** (three IQ points on average), which studies show translates to improved performance in school and increased long-term earning potential.
- Each year a mother breastfeeds, her risk of developing invasive **breast cancer decreases by six percent**.
- Globally, estimated costs of lower cognitive ability associated with not breastfeeding amount to about **\$300 billion annually** (about 0.49 percent of GNI).

Thailand and Breastfeeding

While nearly eight out of ten mothers in Thailand breastfeed, the country's exclusive breastfeeding rates are among the lowest in the world. Indicators show opportunity for significant improvements in breastfeeding practices that will drive social and economic impact for the entire country.

- According to UNICEF's 2015 State of the World's Children Report, in Thailand:
 - 46 percent of infants are breastfed within the first hour of birth;
 - 12 percent of infants are exclusively breastfed for the first six months;
 - 32 percent of infants continue breastfeeding at one year; and
 - 18 percent of children are breastfed at two years.¹
- In addition, several additional infant and young child feeding indicators are of particular concern:
 - 96 percent of infants who are not exclusively breastfed consume water;
 - 71 percent of infants are bottle fed; and
 - Consumption of water displaces breastmilk and even infant formula, which can lead to wasting.²

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *State of the World's Children 2015: Reimagine the Future: Innovation for Every Child*. November 2014.

² Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, UNICEF, 2014

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Strengthening Policies and Programmes

The Lancet Series found that women are two and a half times more likely to breastfeed where the practice is protected, promoted and supported. Thailand should strengthen areas of action identified by the Series as high-potential policy and program opportunities, including:

- **Strengthening and enforcing legislation to restrict marketing of breastmilk substitutes** for infants and young children through national laws and rigorous monitoring to ensure that marketing does not undermine breastfeeding;
- **Expanding maternity protections in the workplace**, including paid maternity leave for six months and workplace support programs like lactation rooms and breastfeeding breaks;
- **Reinforcing a breastfeeding culture** by certifying hospitals as “Baby Friendly” and supporting programs that promote optimal breastfeeding; and
- **Increasing political will** across government and civil society invest time and resources in programmes that support breastfeeding.

A Path to Global Targets

Thailand has a strong history of leading the way in reducing undernutrition. Its efforts in implementing a community-based model of nutrition have been widely recognized as producing rapid and sustainable gains in nutrition indicators.

The 2015 Global Nutrition Report, however, revealed new data that suggests that many of these gains have stalled—and some have even reversed. The GNR tracks eight indicators, including under-5 stunting, wasting and overweight; exclusive breastfeeding; anemia in women; and adult overweight, obesity and diabetes.

Today, Thailand has an opportunity to reclaim progress and further strengthen its policies and programs to improve breastfeeding rates around the country. Whether it is the Sustainable Development Goals, the WHO Global Nutrition Targets, the Global Strategy for Women and Children’s health or other targets—the benefits of breastfeeding can amplify health and development efforts, while the consequences of poor infant and young child nutrition can hold countries back. By reducing child deaths and improving nutrition, child health, education and maternal health, breastfeeding has the potential to be a fundamental driver in achieving global, regional and national goals.